

Reigning Cats & Dogs

The Cincinnati Zoo's odd couple are partners in education

By Amy Sutherland

As visitors walk from their cars across a stretch of black tar to the entrance of the Cincinnati Zoo, they might be surprised to hear the emphatic, baritone barks of a dog behind them. A bark anywhere else isn't so

likely to grab people's attention, but here among the elephants, baboons and rhinos, a *woof* can make them slow their pace, even stop and turn to see where, in a zoo, those *ruffs* are coming from. If they train their eyes on a small rise on the far side of the parking lot and look among the trees, they might spot the source—a large, lanky, yellow dog in an enclosure. Next to the verbose pooch, they might also notice a cheetah lying on its side, occasionally flicking its long tail. So one question is answered, but it prompts two more: Why is there a dog in the Cincinnati Zoo, and what is she doing with a cheetah?

The dog is an Anatolian Shepherd named Alexa (Lexi) who weighs in at 95 pounds. With her long back and legs, she has the loose-limbed gait of a basketball player. Her blonde coat darkens around her muzzle and the edges of her ears, as though she poked her head briefly into a bin of coal.

Her roommate is a cheetah named Sahara, Sara for short. Both are seven years old and have been near-constant companions at the zoo since one was a

cub and the other a pup. They are members of the zoo's Cat Ambassadors, an outreach program that also includes ocelots, servals, even house cats (the program has four cheetahs). The ambassadors and their trainers visit 150 schools a year.

From the African Plains ...

Lexi was added to the ambassadors as a representative of an innovative conservation program in Namibia that is using dogs to save cheetahs in the wild. When Laurie Marker, cofounder and executive director of the Cheetah Conservation Fund (CCF), moved to Namibia in the early '90s, she learned that Namibia's farmers routinely shot cheetahs on their property, the way ranchers once shot wolves in the American West. Namibia has the largest population of cheetahs, but it had declined by half between the 1980s and the 1990s, to 2,500. There are only 12,000 to 15,000 cheetahs remaining worldwide, and they are extinct in 20 of the countries in which they once roamed.

If Namibia was going to hold on to its cheetahs, farmers had to quit shoot-



Sahara and Alexa

ing the cats out of hand, but as long as their livestock was threatened, they'd reach for their guns. Namibian farmers did use guard dogs, but they were a small, native type who did not intimidate serious predators, including cheetahs. They needed a more formidable canine.

Anatolian Shepherds, also called Kangal Shepherds, fit the bill. This ancient breed has been used in Turkey for 6,000 years to protect sheep from wolves. The dogs are made for life outside. They have thick coats, which deter thorns, and

fur down her spine. The young cheetah lunged at the puppy, ripped Lexi's little floppy ear and bloodied her soft snout. Hilker pulled them apart. That first meeting set a tone. Hilker's house, where she raised the twosome, echoed with snarls and yelps.

"Sara tried to kill that dog for weeks," Hilker says. "It was a nightmare. I wanted to send the dog back."

Hilker put their crates next to each other at night so the cheetah and the dog would essentially sleep together. That improved relations some, but Sara still wasn't above swiping Lexi with a spotted paw. Worse, Lexi began to fight back. One of the zoo's trainers recruited her own dog, a Labrador/Setter mix named Riley, to mediate. The pup and cub went to the trainer's house, where, if they fought, Riley jumped in the middle and barked until peace was restored. Finally, détente was reached between the young cheetah and dog. They even began to chase each other—for fun.

Nearly seven years later, Lexi and Sara are still buddies. They share a roomy corner enclosure in the ambassadors' compound, but are separated at meal time (food can bring out the old fight in them), at night and when Sara is in heat. They still chase each other occasionally, but Lexi has mostly outgrown playing (cheetahs never do).

Despite the shaky start, Lexi and Sara are a success, so much so that Hilker got another Anatolian. CJ, short for Calamity Jane, arrived in 2004. She was to be paired with two young cheetah brothers, but the brothers thought otherwise. They let CJ have it, and CJ, undaunted, gave it back. Hilker quickly abandoned her plan before dog or cheetah landed in the vet hospital. CJ, who's not nearly as big as Lexi, can be paired with Sara, who's used to dogs. In fact, the pair chase each other the way Sara and Lexi once did. The two dogs also hit it off. Each afternoon, members of the zoo's finance department walk them for an hour around the zoo—in the summer, outside along the parking lots, and in the winter, inside past the animal cages. They

surprise lemurs as they pass by, and like to visit the donkey in the children's petting zoo. Lexi keeps an eye peeled for rabbits while CJ hunts for lizards sunning themselves. The dogs wear special tags proclaiming their zoo status. Still, people are forever commenting, "I did not know you could bring your dog to the zoo."

On the Job

This morning, after the litter boxes are scooped, the cats' water bowls are emptied and refilled, and their breakfast of raw meat is prepped, zoo trainer Linda Castaneda strides past the wide-eyed ocelots and big-eared servals to let the dogs out. She scoops cheetah poop in the compound's small grassy yard so the Shepherds won't eat it. Then, as Sara watches, Castaneda lets the dogs out for a romp. Lexi rolls on her back to wrestle with CJ. The two follow Castaneda through another door into the compound's new show area, a large yard that edges the street.

As Castaneda sets up for the 11 AM show, laying out a lure for Sara to chase, the two dogs alternately play and nose around. Then, a high yip from a neighborhood dog sends them into guard-dog mode. They dash to the fence, and Lexi lets loose with a barrage of loud, low *ruh-ruh-ruhs*, punctuated with a snarl at the end. CJ's hackles rise and her tail curls into an O as she stands at attention. The dog—somewhere among the nearby houses—lets out another half-hearted yip, which sets Lexi thundering again. Wisely, the neighborhood pooch goes quiet. **B**

DIG DEEPER

Cheetah Conservation Fund
cheetah.org

Cincinnati Zoo Cat Ambassador Program
cincyzoo.org/Education/CatAmbassador/cap.html



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