

How to train an Elephant

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Now, I realize that this particular article is going to raise a few eyebrows, especially in the circus, wildlife park and zoo fraternity. It may also upset some of those amongst you who do not work with animals. Also, on the understanding that there are a large percentage of children that read this column, there may well be one or two tears before bed time.

However, I am renowned for speaking out, being blunt and feel it is my duty to write factual information, even when the truth may come as a shock to some individuals.

So, first of all, let's just dispel the rumour that elephant training, from the off-set, is all a bed of roses.

True, in later stages of elephant training, it is pretty much based on a "treat and reward" basis, but the initial stages of training are messy, noisy and not without risk of injury, sometimes fatal, to either elephant or trainer.

So, bearing this in mind, I suggest you remove your rose-tinted spectacles and face up to the reality of the procedures followed by many mahouts and elephant trainers around the world, as well as those, myself included, who strive to make training routines a lot less stressful and dangerous for both elephant and trainer.

Before a mahout or trainer even approaches an elephant which has not been trained, he or she must have access to a number of restraining devices.

These are as follows:

- Hook (ankus/thotti)
- Long Pole (valiya kol)
- Short Stick (cherukol)
- Chains & Ropes

In circus, wildlife park and zoo environments in particular, elephant section personnel will also have access to a "hotshot", or cattle prod, capable of emitting a substantial electric shock.

While I appreciate that the latter restraining device is generally only used in disciplinary or emergency situations, I personally know of a number of elephant trainers around the world who use such a device, liberally and in an unprofessional manner, in their elephant training routines.

I, personally, refrain from using "hotshots" and cattle prods, relying mainly on my ankus (see "Elephant People" at 'Elephant Whispers').

However, being a traditionalist, when working with totally undomesticated elephants for the first time, I do have access to a Long Pole and Short Stick.

Hook (ankus/thotti):

A typical hook (ankus/thotti) is approximately three-and-a-half feet (3.5') in length and three inches (3") in diameter. The two ends vary in thickness and it is towards the

rounder and thicker end that a metal hook is attached. The area above the hooked attachment is generally either flat or rounded. In typical traditional fashion, the areas above and around the hooked attachment are concealed with brass.

My personal tailor-made ankus is a little (but not by much) longer than the conventional models, with a larger hook and tipped spike made from stainless steel. The metal handle is covered with a cork fishing-rod handle (my own little upgrade!) which gives me maximum comfort and grip.

My ankus was also so professionally and expertly constructed, so that (considering its length) it also balances perfectly on just two fingers of my right hand, when walking alongside the elephants in my control left front shoulder.

I would, under no circumstances whatsoever, trade my ankus for the more conventional modern day models used in Western society.

The hook attachment of any hook (ankus/thotti) is specifically for controlling and directing the elephant in the care of the handler, mahout or trainer.

Long Pole (valiya kol):

Measuring some ten-and-a-half feet (10.5') in length and approximately five-and-a-half inches (5.5") in diameter, the Long Pole (valiya kol) has one rounded end from which a piece of metal (kooru) measuring approximately one inch (1") protrudes, with a knife measuring some four inches (4") being present at the other end of the pole. In some cases, the knife attachment is replaced with a round metal ball which, though it can cause severe pain to the elephant, will not puncture the skin, thus reducing the chances of any wounds sustained by the elephant, during training or handling, becoming infected. However, the kooru (metal protrusion) at the opposite end of the Long Pole (valiya kol), will puncture the skin and cause external injury to the elephant.

The Long Pole (valiya kol) is used only when the elephant will not permit the handler, mahout or trainer to have close contact.

Short Stick (cherukol):

With the foremost end being more rounded and thicker, the Short Stick (cherukol) measures some three-and-a-half to four feet (3.5'-4') in length, with a diameter ranging between two to two-and-a-half inches (2"-2.5").

The handler, mahout or trainer must always carry this device with them and, being made from the branches of just a few specific tree species, is used to strike, or subject the elephant to a series of blows, the thicker, rounded end making contact with the elephant.

I should, at this point, make it clear that the above mentioned restraining devices are generally used with extreme care in the hands of a professional. It takes a great deal of training on behalf of the handler, mahout or trainer to learn how to use such devices of restraint and control, correctly.

The Long Pole (valiya kol) and Short Stick (cherukol) in particular, must only be used when there is no other option available to bring the elephant under control.

Chains & Ropes:

Chain sizes should be between a half inch to one-and-a-half inches (0.5"-1.5") thick and at least twenty one feet (21') in length.

Chains will ensure that elephants that are renowned for making a run for it, stick around and let the handler, mahout or trainer carry out any work on, or around, that elephant (see "Elephant Handling" at 'Elephant Whispers').

Chains that are used on the legs can also be used around the elephant's body.

It is advisable to reinforce the chains with strong rope. Any knots in the rope must be tied tightly so as to prevent the elephant from untying the knots with its very versatile trunk.

Chains must be fitted with a swivel mechanism to prevent tangling and I frown upon chains being used which have spikes or sharp protrusions attached.

When restraining an elephant by its legs to "tying-off" points, I use 'sea fairing' knots for speed and reliability. Wrap the rope several times around the "tying-off" point, create a loop, pass the loose end of the rope through the loop and pull tightly. The result is a knot which can be tied in seconds and will remain secure until released by the handler, mahout or trainer,

When introducing an elephant to a chain for the first time, I just place a loose length of chain over the elephant and immediately vacate the area. The reason being, that the elephant is going to hurl and swing the chain around, - and I, for one, do not wish to get hit by it. Once the elephant has realized that the chain poses no threat, then securing the elephant to a "tying-off" point can commence.

Some facilities and institutions chain their elephants up over night. I frown upon this practice as I believe that the shorter the time an elephant is chained, the better. Once an elephant has been chained to a "tying-off" point, or two, a handler, mahout or trainer must always provide fresh food and water for that elephant.

Every handler, mahout or trainer, worth his or her salt, will know that there are, in total, one-hundred-and-seven (107) areas on an elephant's anatomy which must be avoided at all cost, during training. We call these sensitive areas "marmams".

There are forty-four (44) marmams on the limbs, eleven (11) on each; three (3) on the lower abdomen; nine (9) on the chest area; fourteen (14) on the back; twelve (12) on the neck; and twenty-five (25) on the head.

Other areas to be avoided are the anus, genital areas, mammary glands, trunk, heart, center of the face, the eyes, the ears, the mouth and the central pelvis area.

Many callouses can form on an elephant's body through human negligence and improper use of restraining equipment. These areas must also be avoided as they will never properly heal and are prone to serious infection.

Every handler, mahout and trainer must be made aware of the fact that the happiness, health and prosperity of the elephant in his or her care, rests entirely in his or her hands.

Tip Of The Trunk (thunikkai):

Asian elephants have one 'finger' at the tip of the trunk, whereas African elephants have two. This area (and in reality, the whole of the trunk) must be avoided at all times as the trunk is probably the most important organ of any elephant. If the trunk becomes damaged, this will result in the elephant not being able to properly breathe, smell, drink or feed.

Temporal Area (kannakuzhi):

Damage to this area, caused by the Short Stick (cherukol) or hook (ankus/thotti), will eventually lead to blindness in the elephant. It has been proven that serious injuries to this area will also effect the flow of temporal discharge in bulls going through musth and cows in estrous.

Head:

Any injuries to the head will cause internal swelling, a build up of pus and also, in many cases, lead to permanent brain damage.

Forehead Bump (vayukumbham):

As with normal head injuries (see above), any damage to this area will lead to internal swelling, a build up of pus (which will also be seen dripping from the trunk) and quite possibly permanent brain damage.

Mahouts Seating Area (irikkasthanam):

The area on an elephants back, where the handler, mahout or trainer perches when riding, can become incredibly tender, if subjected to constant pressure.

Foreleg Callouses (vakkathazambu):

Being more common in working elephants, these callouses are formed due to constant use and abrasion from the logging rope (vakka).

Front Foot Depression (thavalakkuzhi):

Unprofessional use of the Long Pole (valiya kol) to these areas, behind the front legs, above the lower part of the foot, results in the front feet bending inwards, if such abuse is allowed to continue.

Penis:

When fully emerged, especially during musth, the penis may well trail along the ground. Abrasions to the penis are therefore not uncommon and the handler, mahout or trainer must avoid any abuse to this very sensitive part of the bull's body.

Belly:

Abuse to this part of the elephant's anatomy, especially after the elephant has fed, must be avoided. Unprofessional use of the Short Stick (cherukol) to this area will lead to digestive problems, internal infection and a build up of pus.

Pelvis Callouses (kidakkathazambu):

These callouses are formed where the elephant lays on its side for long periods of time.

Chain Callouses:

It is important that correct and proper use of chains or hobbles is exercised. Elephants should be chained or hobbled for the minimum amount of time possible (elephants in my care are chained for no longer than one (1) hour a day), otherwise callouses form on the skin around these areas.

Palate (melannakku):

This area may appear thick, but upon penetration from a sharp object, can bleed quite profusely. I must urge all handlers, mahouts and trainers to avoid this area at all cost. Some handlers, mahouts and trainers have been known to prod this area in order to make the elephant in their care keep its head up (I know, because I have witnessed several handlers, mahouts and trainers do it), - DON'T!

Perineal Area:

Prodding and beating this area on bull elephants will result in permanent damage being caused to the penis.

So, now that we as handlers, mahouts and trainers, are all "kitted up" and aware of what areas to avoid on our elephants' body, we are ready to approach our elephants. When doing so we must remain calm and focused.

In order for me to be at my most prepared for this stage in initial training, I spend a substantial amount of time making observations of the elephant I am about to commence training, getting to know its character, habits and quirks (see "Elephant People" at 'Elephant Whispers').

In India, mahouts pray to their teacher and most favoured God, before mounting their elephants.

All elephants must be approached from the left hand side and a handler, mahout or trainer must command his or her elephant to move to his or her right.

If the elephant beats its trunk on the ground, this indicates that the elephant is in a co-operative mood and is showing a willingness to learn. There will be a lot of defecating and urinating, so handlers, mahouts and trainers must have a good supply of sand and sawdust at hand to minimize wetness around the elephant.

However, if the elephant is not in the mood for training, it will shake its head and also smell the handler, mahout or trainer with its trunk. It is important for a handler, mahout or trainer to recognize these signs of protest and in such cases the elephant must be made to lay down, prior to its release from the chains. This will ensure that the elephant remains subservient to the handler, mahout and trainer.

Though I received a great deal of inspiration from the great Monty Roberts (Horse Whisperer), breaking an elephant is very different to breaking a horse. However, saying that, the basic principle of being able to communicate with the elephant is of utmost importance.

In India, we call the process of breaking an elephant, "kettiazhikkal".

Kettiazhikkal, is when a new mahout is introduced to an elephant. The mahout will bring the elephant under control by using restraining devices at his or her disposal.

The mahout will subject the elephant to torture and beatings, often hurling verbal abuse at the elephant in an attempt to scare the elephant into submission.

Many Western elephant trainers in circus, wildlife park and zoo environments practice the same routine. However, in my opinion, this practice only serves to encourage a "flight or fight" response from the elephant and indeed a great number of handlers, mahouts and trainers have suffered fatal injury because of it.

This then leads to legal inquiries and the families of deceased or seriously injured handlers, mahouts and trainers calling for the elephant to be euthanased, where if a different approach to breaking an elephant were to be followed, the chances of injury or death to humans would be greatly reduced.

We are, after all, attempting to conserve an endangered species here, are we not? Elephants are also known to have died during kettiazhikkal, or have been severely mutilated in the process.

Kettiazhikkal is also practiced while bull elephants are being unchained after their musth period. Bulls in musth do not co-operate well with their handlers, mahouts or trainers. The reason being that bull elephants in musth are intoxicated, dangerous and therefore human contact is kept at a minimum. However, after musth, a handler, mahout or trainer will re-establish his or her dominance over the bull and this is achieved by practicing kettiazhikkal.

In circus, wildlife park and zoo environments, as well as in camps, facilities and institutions around the world, staff changes around elephants are becoming far too frequent.

Elephants are also re-located to other facilities and institutions a lot more now, so therefore "showing the elephants who's boss" is a regular occurrence. As a result of the torture and harshness which elephants in these situations are subjected to, handlers, mahouts and trainers very often now frown upon kettiazhikkal, myself included.

When breaking an elephant, one front leg and the opposite rear leg are chained and secured to "tying-off" points. Two more elephant section personnel or mahouts will approach the elephant and commence stirring up and disturbing the elephant, encouraging the elephant to attack them. The trainer, or intended mahout, will then commence giving the elephant verbal commands and if the elephant disobeys (which, of course, it naturally will) then the other handlers or mahouts will proceed to attack and beat the elephant with whatever restraining devices are at their disposal. This continues until the elephant becomes exhausted and gradually stops resisting, showing a willingness to learn and thus obey the trainer's commands.

However, the elephant must always be able to see where the abuse is coming from. Creeping up on an elephant is considered bad practice.

The elephant must be able to see which restraining device is causing the pain. This ensures the submissiveness of the elephant later on when it is approached by a

handler, mahout or trainer carrying a particular restraining device, fearful and well aware of the pain that the restraining device is capable of dishing out. Elephants are permitted to fight back, but will soon learn that it will always be dominated.

The handler, mahout or trainer is therefore, in effect, assuming the matriarchal and dominant role of the elephant or elephants retained at the facility or institution. When the trainer or mahout is convinced that the elephant is submissive, the elephant will be commanded to lie down.

One handler or mahout will then mount the elephant, while the trainer stands at the front left shoulder of the elephant. The elephant is then released from the "tying-off" points in the training area, with the chains still around its legs and walked to another new "tying-off" point. Elephant personnel will then be very careful of their movements around the elephant for at least thirty (30) days after kettiazhikkal. Thereafter, at least two handlers or mahouts should work around the elephant. As I mentioned before, the same practice occurs in circus, wildlife park and zoo environments around the world, - it's just the way things are done.

Remember, I, of course, am proud to be able to disassociate myself with such behaviour and have successfully devised a proven method of breaking elephants which is far less stressful for both elephant, handler, mahout and trainer. I have had my critics and sceptics, but then, who doesn't when a new way of doing things is introduced into any environment? I have, however, proven on numerous occasions, that the "old ways are not always the best ways". When called in to work with elephants that require training, I will make observations of those elephants on an individual and group structure basis. I can happily sit for days on end on an enclosure wall, or sleep in the barn night after night, making my observations of those elephants, feeding them, singing to them, talking to them, working around them, until such a time that they have gotten used to me being around, - all this before any training takes place. I will then listen to what the elephants are telling me by the way they react to the environment and staff around them, after which I will then create an environment in which those elephants will be comfortable in, regardless of what changes I have to make to that facility or institution. Only by this way, can one expect to develop and establish the necessary bond based on trust and commitment, which must be maintained to the highest possible standard, for life.

To my critics and sceptics that remain amongst you in the circus, wildlife park, zoo and camp fraternity, I say "prove me wrong". Arrange to see me in action, as my converted critics and sceptics did before you.
Until next time



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Next Week: Secondary Stages of Training a Captive Elephant.