



Tiger Splash™ – Power and Control

By Dean Harrison

The tiger charged the man through the water. As the man turned, the orange, white, and black striped predator caught him. We could see that the tiger had the man's arm in his mouth, and it looked to all as if he was a goner. But actually, it was exactly what was supposed to happen. Samara, a Bengal tiger, was practicing her hunting skills on Gerry, one of the people who love, play, and swim with big cats at Out of Africa Wildlife Park. Two or more tigers and sometimes other big cats interact in a predator/prey relationship during the parks most popular educational program — Tiger Splash™.

As the tiger charged after Gerry, he put his arm up so the tiger would not open her mouth around his head -- a very uncomfortable position. It's dark and hard to see, you know. By placing his arm in the "right" position the four large canine teeth go on one side and the sharp but smaller pre-molars go on the other. It's almost a perfect fit. The whole scene looks frightening, and it would be except that the tiger has learned to be meek; her great power is under control. If she bites too hard, she'll break the arm. If she uses her claws to hold the prey, Gerry would look and feel differently about his job. But the tiger has learned to be careful with her natural equipment. In some respects, her mouth is like our hand. We have the sensitivity to detect our impression on someone we are shaking hands with, to know how much pressure to exert that is acceptable to someone else. If you have ever seen a Tiger Splash show, you know exactly what I'm talking about — meekness. It is power under control. Just because the tiger could kill us, it doesn't mean she should. It is a choice she makes. Yes, a conscious choice, a decision to accurately consider another's comfort level and hold back even in the excitement of an all out attack.

Samara and her white companion, Elijah, are experts in the control of power. They chase us, dive under water after us, and even double team us. They easily distinguish us from toys of plastic, rubber, rope, and cloth. Rarely do they make a mistake. They know when they have a hold of our clothes, when our flesh is caught, and when it is not. And they learned this in one day. But we didn't teach them — Jamaica did. Jamaica is a 75-pound black leopard, referred to by many as a black panther. I asked her to discipline the two newly arrived tigers about a year ago. They were nine months old and already substantial in size. They had had some human contact, but nothing like what's involved in Tiger Splash. I asked Jamaica because, by the second day after their arrival, Elijah had bitten four of us — not serious bites, but painful.

Jamaica was in season at the time and she didn't care who was with her. She gladly accepted the two larger felines, who came to her one at a time. They each came to her to show her their superior strength. After all, they are tigers. Jamaica swatted each across the nose, turned, and confidently walked away. Several more attempts by both tigers, together and separately, proved futile. The leopard's age, speed, and technique easily outgunned both young tigers.

The following day we brought both tigers back into the Tiger Splash arena for their first show. They didn't bite and neither used their claws. And to this day neither has attempted any harm to any one of several people who work with them. They will always be wild, but as long as they can maintain control of their power, they will be meek.