

Spinal Surgery Saves Lion

Olla the lion recovers from surgery at a Florida animal sanctuary.

By Soraya Gutierrez

Posted: June 6, 2008 2 a.m. EDT

A lion underwent spinal surgery to help restore the use of her hind legs. Big, fat and happy is how Clayton Rosaire describes Olla, the 400-pound lion that recently underwent spinal surgery to help restore the use of her hind legs. The 15-year-old big cat escaped euthanasia when she was rescued by Rosaire and the Big Cat Habitat and Gulf Coast Sanctuary in Sarasota, Fla.

Olla arrived at Big Cat Habitat with six other lions after the U.S. Department of Fish and Game and Florida Fish and Wildlife asked the sanctuary to provide a safe, permanent home. Olla and the other lions had spent two years in small cages in a wooded area and faced being euthanized.

"She used to perform in the circus in her glory days," Rosaire said. "We picked her up after she moved around a couple of times."

The nonprofit sanctuary raised enough donations to build an outdoor living area for the lions to be together and run free. Most of the lions, including Olla, had some health problems, including shattered canine teeth.

Then, Olla's health deteriorated when she lost the use of her back legs. The lion was dragging her hind end one morning. In many sanctuaries, this usually results in euthanasia, Rosaire said.

Not willing to put the lion to sleep, the sanctuary sought the help of a veterinary surgeon nearby. Dr. Anne Chauvet operated on a herniated disc that was compressing Olla's spinal cord and causing the paralysis.

"Performing surgery on such a large animal is challenging," Chauvet said. "Six people carried her to the procedure rooms for a myelogram dye study of her spinal cord and the subsequent surgery. I know of only a handful of other instances where such surgeries have even been attempted on big cats."

The entire procedure took about six hours, she said. The surgery and aftercare was donated, and Chauvet also searched for someone willing to provide a pool for the lion's rehabilitation at the sanctuary.

To aid in her recovery, a Los Angeles company donated a custom pool to help Olla regain the full use of her legs. Kay Rosaire, founder of the Big Cat Habitat, said the pool will be the fastest way to rebuild muscle strength in Olla's back legs. "We will have to convince her that lions really do like water," Rosaire said.

So far, Olla has responded well to treatment. Kay and Clayton Rosaire are optimistic about her recovery.

"She's improving every day. She is up and jogging around," Clayton Rosaire said. "She's just a big, beautiful, fat lion."