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A Run for the Record

Cincinnati Zoo Cheetah Takes On South African Cheetah for World Record

CINCINNATI (July 21, 2009) –Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt and American sprinter Tyson Gay are two of the fastest humans on earth. Both are known for speed and both hold 100 meter world records with times of 9.72 seconds and 9.77 seconds respectively. Sarah, the Cincinnati Zoo’s eight-year-old female cheetah, will attempt to break the world record for all land mammals, including humans in the Olympic 100-meter dash, when she takes on “Zaza”, an eight-year-old female South African cheetah.

“We are going to run the spots off Zaza,” said Cathryn Hilker, founder of the Cincinnati Zoo’s Cat Ambassador Program, as a friendly challenge to her South African counterpart, Annie Beckhelling.

“Our Zaza is going to give that cheeky American cat, Sarah, a run for her money,” responded Beckhelling.

Here’s how it works. Each cheetah will get three runs. Zaza will set the world record for female cheetahs when she goes first August 15 at Cheetah Outreach in South Africa at a measured course set by the Athletic Standards of South Africa. Her time and video of the run will be shared with the Cincinnati Zoo prior to Sarah’s run. Sarah will then attempt to break Zaza’s time with three runs of her own on September 9 at the Kentucky Speedway at a measured course, certified by Road Running Technical Council of USA Track & Field.

The Cincinnati Zoo has a strong connection to the Kentucky Speedway. Moya, one of the Cincinnati Zoo’s former ambassadors, who passed away earlier this year, set the 100 meter world record in 2000. Moya bettered his brother’s 1999 record a few times, with a final record of 6.60 seconds. Moya's record stood unbroken until his brother Nyana broke it in 2001 with a final record of 6.19 seconds in South Africa.

The connection does not end there. IndyCar Series Driver Sarah Fisher, who coincidentally shares the same name as the cheetah from the Cincinnati Zoo, holds the Kentucky Speedway track qualifying record set in 2002. Her qualifying speed was 221.390 mph (lap time of 24.0661 seconds). It’s a record that still holds above all other female drivers today.

“Of course, there is a serious side to all this excitement about the “Run For The Record” international cheetah race,” said Cincinnati Zoo Director, Thane Maynard. “Cheetahs are one of the most beloved animals on Earth, but they are also endangered. The Cincinnati Zoo is proud to have played a leading role in African cheetah conservation for the past 20 years.”

The cheetah population worldwide has shrunk from about 100,000 a decade ago to 12,500 today. These numbers have somewhat stabilized thanks in large part to the efforts of the Zoo’s Angel Fund and Cheetah Outreach.

Since 1990 the Cincinnati Zoo’s “Angel Fund,” named after our first cheetah ambassador, “Angel,” has directly supported cheetah conservation in Africa. From South African & Namibia in the south, up through Kenya & Tanzania in East Africa, The Angel Fund has contributed more than \$1 million in support for cheetahs in the wild.

Similar to the Zoo Angel Fund, Beckhelling founded Cheetah Outreach, to raise awareness about the endangered cheetah and to raise funds to support the cheetah conservation efforts. This outreach program helps to ensure the survival of the fastest animal on Earth, the wild cheetah! Moya, part of the only litter of cubs born at Cheetah Outreach in 1997, was donated to The Angel Fund to assist them with their efforts of raising awareness for the plight of the cheetah.

The Cincinnati Zoo has been dubbed “The Cheetah Capital of the World” because of its efforts through education, public interpretation, conservation and the captive cheetah breeding program. Since 1980 the Cincinnati Zoo’s “Cat Ambassador Program” has taken African cheetahs to schools and programs around the U.S, Canada, and Central America to spread the word that cheetahs are running for their lives. In addition, each summer the Zoo takes 22 school teachers to the Cheetah Conservation Fund’s headquarters in Namibia for a two-week conservation field study. The Zoo’s Mast Breeding Farm outside of town is one of the world’s leading cheetah breeding centers. Four litters of healthy cubs have been born and raised at the Mast Farm since 2007.

Cincinnati Zoo visitors can watch the Cheetah Encounter and observe the speed and grace of “Sarah,” as well as the brother coalition, “Bravo” and “Chance” and the youngest athlete in the program, “Tommy T”. The Cincinnati Zoo is also underway on a major fundraising effort to build the biggest exhibit in its 136 year history – The African Savannah – the jewel of which will be the new Cheetah Encounter.

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