

36 Hours Old — With an Attitude

Ron Ringer SENIOR KEEPER/ZOO

San Diego Zoo: R. Garrison



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Doing a postbirth exam, referred to as "processing," can be daunting to a young rhino just getting used to the ways of the world. Rikhe did not particularly like Veterinarian Meg Sutherland-Smith's stethoscope, but he finally allowed her to check his heart-beat. A bit later, Rikhe also reluctantly permitted her to give him a quick physical and draw some blood.

By the time Senior Keeper Ron Ringer was ready to weigh him, Rikhe had had enough and raised quite a ruckus before Ron could hold him still enough to step on the scale.

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Every once in awhile, keepers get to take part in procedures that most visitors would give their first-born child to be involved in. I had just such an opportunity two days after the birth of the San Diego Zoo's first black rhino calf, named Werikhe.

Rikhe, as the keepers affectionately call him, was born at about 10 P.M. on November 15, 1992. He was named for Kenya's Rhino Man, Michael Werikhe, who has done fund-raising "rhino walks" around the world to educate people about the plight of the black rhino. I first saw the new calf at the Zoo the next morning when I came in to work. I had never been around a newborn rhino, and I have to admit that I was somewhat surprised at what I found. Here was this gray, scrawny little version of a rhino that could barely walk. His back legs were so shaky you would have thought we were having an earthquake of about 8.0 on the Richter scale. His back feet were exactly too big for him. They looked like size 12 rubber boots on a size 3 foot. He seemed so helpless; about all he was capable of was nursing on his mom, Scooter, and he did that with a vengeance. But, I had to admit that this was one cute baby.

After the birth of a Zoo animal, we usually do a procedure called "processing." Keepers catch the baby for the veterinarians, and they give it a quick physical, draw blood to make sure it's receiving the necessary nutrients from nursing, give it some antibiotics as a precaution, and then give it a Zoo identification of either an ear notch or a tattoo, or sometimes both. Because this was the first rhino birth at the Zoo, we decided not to do the usual processing unless we were concerned about the calf's health. We would continue to observe him for a full 36 hours to make sure he continued to nurse and was getting along okay.

On the second morning after his birth, we decided to catch Rikhe because the vets had some concerns about his umbilical cord. Rikhe was born outside on the dirt, and there was a chance that his umbilical cord could get infected. We decided to perform a basic processing, in which we would treat his umbilicus, check his heart rate,

weigh him, and give him some antibiotics. We wanted to cause as little stress for him and his mom as we could, so it would be a quick procedure. The vet would treat the umbilicus and check his heart without catching him and then weigh him and give his injections all at the same time. We hoped that as long as her calf didn't cry out, Scooter would stay somewhat calm.

As we gathered for the procedure and divided up our responsibilities, I volunteered myself to catch Rikhe and weigh him. I thought that it would be a piece of cake. I had caught giraffes that weighed up to 140 pounds during my previous job, so I figured that this little guy, who weighed less, would be no problem. The three of us who would be handling the calf put on surgical gowns and gloves so we wouldn't leave any smells on Rikhe that his mom might find offensive. We separated Scooter from her calf outside and kept Rikhe inside the barn.

No one would have guessed what awaited us inside. As we walked into the stall, we got down on our hands and knees so that we wouldn't scare Rikhe too much. As we did this, Rikhe was calm. He snorted a little and came over to investigate us. Meg Sutherland-Smith, the veterinarian, treated his umbilical cord with no problem at all, but when she pulled out her stethoscope, Rikhe backed up about three steps, snorted, and charged Meg. The line had been drawn: "You can treat my belly button, lady, but keep that shiny thing away from me or I'll take you out." Everyone in the room was laughing. We had a baby rhino with a definite attitude.

Meg was finally able to check his heartbeat, but not without Rikhe's protest. The next phase required that I grab Rikhe and lift him up in my arms to weigh him. After what I had witnessed between him and Meg, I thought maybe this wasn't going to be as easy as I had planned. Up to this point, Rikhe had been pretty quiet, except for a few snorts. Now, I am from the Midwest, where we occasionally hear tornado sirens. When I grabbed Rikhe, he let out a scream that made those sirens seem like a whisper. The fact that I was now almost entirely deaf was a small



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Scooter's new calf was named Werikhe, in honor of Kenya's Rhino Man, Michael Werikhe. The calf's newborn weight was a solid 68 pounds.

thing in comparison to the thrashing that this little sawed-off rhino was inflicting on me. It was all I could do to hold on to him while I stepped on the scale.

At that moment, mom decided to show her concern by doing some urban renewal on the outside of the barn. To say she was a bit ticked off is a mild understatement. We quickly got a weight for Rikhe, and then Meg gave him his shots. After that, I took him back into his barn and laid him down in the corner. I had no sooner let him go than he decided to take revenge on me. He snorted and charged me in one last defiant gesture before I got out of the barn. During this whole time, Scooter was literally climbing the walls of the building. We se-

cured the area and put mother and son back together. Then all was well with the world once more.

Rikhe weighed 68 pounds and was very healthy—I had the aches and pains of wrestling him to prove it. As we all left the barn, laughing at what took place, it occurred to me that Mother Nature really does give most of her creatures an instinctive knack for survival. Even though Rikhe seemed so helpless, he could still protect himself. We speculated that after we all left, he communicated in some way to his mother how he pushed us around. Needless to say, I have a whole new respect for these so-called baby rhinos—and I use the term baby loosely! **ZNZ**