

Huntington S. 2000 Sep 5. Cheetahs always win! If animals competed in the Sydney Olympics, Humans would be sad because... (unknown).

Keywords: Acinonyx jubatus/cheetah/locomotion/running/speed

Abstract: A record-breaking Olympic runner can go about 27 miles per hour. But ordinary domestic cats can go faster than that, 30 m.p.h. A rabbit in full flight reaches about 45 m.p.h. Pronghorn antelopes can run faster than 60 m.p.h. And the fastest runner of all is the cheetah, at over 70 miles an hour.

Tuesday, September 5, 2000

Cheetahs always win!

If animals competed in the Sydney Olympics, Humans would be sad because ...

by Sharon Huntington

The fastest runner in the world! That's what people sometimes call the person who wins the Olympic 100-meter race. It is a great accomplishment. But we should be very happy that animals aren't allowed to enter the Olympics. If they did, there wouldn't be any medals left for us humans.

A record-breaking Olympic runner can go about 27 miles per hour. But an ordinary housecat can go faster than that, 30 m.p.h. A rabbit in full flight reaches about 45 m.p.h. Pronghorn antelope can run faster than 60 m.p.h. And the fastest runner of all is the cheetah, at over 70 miles an hour.

In the hurdles, the impala (a kind of African antelope) would be a leading contender. Almost as fast as the antelope, the impala can also jump 10 feet in the air from a standing start. When on the run, it can easily leap over most bushes or rocks at full speed.

In jumping, humans fare a little better, but still wouldn't make it onto the medals platform at an animal Olympics. The best human long jumpers jump more than 29 feet. High jumpers clear about 8 feet. An impala can cover a distance of 35 feet in one jump.

The gold medal in the high jump would go to the puma. Its highest jump is 12 feet. It might medal in the long jump as well, at 39 feet. But the kangaroo has it beat at 42 feet.

The kangaroo might cover the longest distance, but for its size, the jack rabbit is the champion. It can jump 20 feet, more than 10 times the length of its body. The kangaroo jumps 8 times its body length, and an Olympic human leaps 5 times his or her body length.

In an insect Olympics, all these animals would be left far behind. A grasshopper can jump 30 inches. If you could jump that many times your body length, you could cover an entire football field in a single bound. And the tiny flea has been known to jump up to 4 feet. Since fleas are less than 1/8 inch long, that means they can jump 384 times the length of their bodies. A human would have to jump about half a mile to equal that.

Even spiders have us beat. The jumping spider can leap up to 40 times its own length. It jumps in the air to grab flying insects, and if it misses, it doesn't have to worry about falling. It spins a thin strand of silk as it jumps, to create a safety line - its own bungee cord.

In the weightlifting division, Olympic humans manage to lift about 260 pounds. Elephants can lift 600 pounds with their trunk. But for their size, ants are the real champions. They can lift up to 50 times their body weight and carry it around over their heads. And they do this with their mouths!

In the swimming competitions, humans are really out of their element, going only 5 miles per hour. Whales and dolphins reach 25 m.p.h. That's about as fast as humans can run on dry land. The blue shark can swim 40 m.p.h., and the fastest swimmer of all is the sailfish, at 68 m.p.h. That's almost twice as fast as a nuclear submarine. Even a bird, the penguin, can swim faster than humans do, at 22 m.p.h.

That brings up another category where humans don't stand a chance: flying. A fly travels at about 5 m.p.h. Butterflies can go twice as fast, but never seem to get anywhere quickly because they don't go in a straight line.

Awkward-looking pelicans can fly 28 m.p.h., faster than humans can run. From there we really get left in the dust. Starlings can go 50, turkeys 58, and canvasback ducks 70 m.p.h. Eagles are great flyers, at 80 m.p.h. But the champion is the peregrine falcon, which can power dive at speeds up to 240 m.p.h. That makes it the fastest creature in the world!

In the diving competition, humans are judged by their form above the water. Animals would probably compete to see who could dive deepest below the surface. Sea otters can reach depths of 100 feet. Human scuba divers may venture below 400 feet, but sperm whales leave them far behind, diving to 3,280 feet. But the record holder is the northern elephant seal, at 5,150 feet - almost a mile!

Many of these animal athletes reach their record performances either chasing their dinner or trying to avoid being dinner. Even deep-diving sea creatures travel to the depths to find food. Running, jumping, and diving are how they survive. Humans may not be the champions in any of the contests, but we are competing for a different reason - the thrill of the race and the chance to test our limits. And we might take the gold medal for having fun.