

Jochum-Natt, S. (2005). Coursing Cheetahs. *Animal Keeper's Forum* 7/8: 304-305.

Keywords: *Acinonyx jubatus*/behaviour/captivity/cheetah/lure course/method

Abstract: We researched what type of lure coursing equipment would work in our exhibit. We spoke to several zoos that use pre-fabricated systems or in-house manufactured systems. Because coursing lures are expensive, for several years we sought out individuals and hobby groups to donate time and resources to make a lure system. Although there was interest, it never worked out due to the project being such a time-consuming task. We eventually decided that it would be best for us to purchase a complete coursing system from Injoy Lure Coursing Equipment® located in Vermont. They manufacture coursing systems for domestic dog coursing programs and many zoo facilities use their products for cheetahs. A complete system costs between \$700 to \$1200 or more. We began to pursue sponsorship for purchasing a system for our cheetahs.

Coursing Cheetahs

*By Stephanie Jochum-Natt, Feline Keeper
Utah's Hogle Zoo, Salt Lake City, Utah*

Finding enrichment items that our two male cheetahs (*Ainonyx jubatus*) will respond well to is always a challenge. Usually a pinata zebra or diced cantaloupe in a cardboard box keeps them occupied for some time, but we wanted to provide them with something that would really bring out their "need for speed." Since cheetahs react well to moving enrichment devices, we thought that a coursing lure would be the perfect item.

We researched what type of lure coursing equipment would work in our exhibit. We spoke to several zoos that use pre-fabricated systems or in-house manufactured systems. Because coursing lures are expensive, for several years we sought out individuals and hobby groups to donate time and resources to make a lure system. Although there was interest, it never worked out due to the project being such a time-consuming task. We eventually decided that it would be best for us to purchase a complete coursing system from Injoy Lure Coursing Equipment® located in Vermont. They manufacture coursing systems for domestic dog coursing programs and many zoo facilities use their products for cheetahs. A complete system costs between \$700 to \$1200 or more. We began to pursue sponsorship for purchasing a system for our cheetahs.

Utah's Hogle Zoo holds its annual Gala fundraiser event every autumn. In 2003 our Behavioral Enrichment Coordinators, Dawn Neptune and Deana Walz, had an enrichment sponsorship booth at the Gala. The BE Coordinators designed giant posters with photos of enrichment devices guests could purchase for the Zoo's animals. One of the posters had all the information about the Injoy Æ coursing lure and why we felt it was important for our cheetahs. Deana and Dawn talked all evening to the guests about the need for enrichment items and how the animals might react to a particular device. All their hard work paid off, not only did the guests sponsor several devices, but one guest also donated enough funds to purchase the entire \$1,200 lure coursing system for the cheetahs. We ordered a system which included a wheel, motor, nylon string line and about a dozen pulleys to hold the line in place. A battery had to be purchased separately. We chose to purchase a marine battery to run the motor, because a marine battery is designed to be drawn down and recharged many times. A continuous run course system was chosen over a single run system. In our opinion a single run course would be over too quickly for the cats.

The initial setup of the system took about two hours, and included several keepers and the Zoo Foreman to figure it out and get it running correctly. The key was to get the correct tension on the nylon line to handle the continuous loop run. If the line was too tight it would break; if it was too loose it would slip off. We used a piece of white plastic bag tied to the line as the lure; it was light and flapped to get the cat's attention.

The first course was laid out in the exhibit yard in a large circle. The motor and battery were set up outside the exhibit where we stood. When the cats were let into the yard with it set up for the first time, we let them inspect all the parts before we ran the lure. We controlled the speed of the lure with a push button on a cord attached to the motor. When the lure moved it startled the cats for a moment. Eventually the smaller cheetah took off after it. After watching his brother for awhile, the other cheetah decided to chase the lure too. The course was in a small section of the yard, so the cats could only jog fast for a few seconds at a time. They were not able to reach a full run. To keep the cats interested we alternated the speed of the lure, running it slowly, creeping it along and speeding it up. After about 20 minutes, both cheetahs were winded and too exhausted to chase it any more.

With practice setting up the courses throughout the summer of 2004 we learned how to reduce the set-up time and how to fix a broken line quickly. We were very proud of ourselves. Experimenting with the set-up and speed of the lure machine, we discovered a few problems we needed to change.

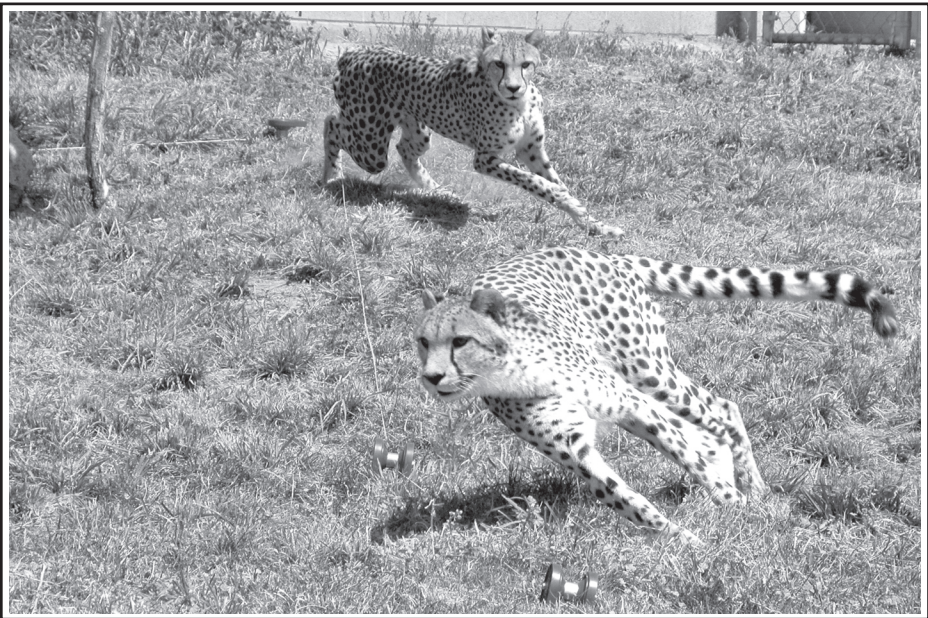
First, the line would break or get caught up in the wheel, so we chose a smaller piece of plastic bag for the lure to prevent it from getting caught, and we made sure that the line had the correct tension.

Our cheetahs shift reliably into the barn, which made it easier to go in and fix a broken line to run the course for them again.

Second, the cats did figure out the course of the layout quickly and would wait at a certain spot for it instead of chasing it. In the future we may decide to solve that problem by purchasing a continuous loop wheel that can be used to reverse the direction of the course.

Third, when a cheetah stood on the line we had to stop the lure machine and re-start it after the cheetah was clear of the line to prevent injuries to its feet or ankles. We also found that if the course had too many tight turns or sharp angles, a running cheetah could easily trip the line and even jump it off of a pulley. To help prevent this, we kept the course wide and round or placed it close to the exhibit mesh so they could only run on one side of the line, and not jump over the line.

Fourth, we discovered that the exhibit yard had many low and high spots that required placing the pulleys perfectly to prevent the line from being too far off the ground where it could potentially become a trip hazard. To help problem solve and determine how to make improvements, we videotaped and photographed each course and took notes on what worked or what needed changing.



Coursing Cheetahs at Hogle Zoo (photo by Jameson Weston)

During the summer of 2004 we ran the lure for the cheetahs one to two times a month and highlighted it on Enrichment Day and our AAZK Chapter's annual "Cheetah Cha Cha" fundraiser for the Cheetah Conservation Fund. Each time we coursed the cheetahs, large crowds of guests and Zoo staff lined up to watch. Meet-A-Keeper programs were set up to talk to the public about the importance of enrichment and describe what behaviors they were seeing from the cheetahs during their interaction with the lure. It was a great opportunity to educate people about cheetahs. We also displayed a sign explaining how a zoo guest had sponsored the purchase of the coursing equipment, and how other guests could help fund our enrichment program. Later that year another Zoo guest purchased a half dozen more pulleys for us, which will allow us in to create an even larger course than before. Overall, acquiring the lure coursing system proved to be an exciting enrichment device for the cheetahs, the staff and the guests.

For Purchasing Information Contact: Tom Bianchi, Injoy Lure Coursing Equipment, P.O. Box 21, Charlotte, VT 05445. Tel. (802) 425-3691 FAX (802) 425-4468 Website: www.injoy-l.com