

Alligator Wrestling

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The 6-foot long, 200-pound alligator was about the length and weight of a new refrigerator-- well, if a refrigerator could hiss and thrash. In the shadow of the Sangre De Cristo Mountains, Jay Young waded into the alligator's pond, and jumped on its back.

Wearing a cow leather hat with alligator print, a blue Hawaiian shirt, and a dark tank top pierced with holes, Jay pinned the gator, and then examined it. The sick animal was on antibiotics but its condition was improving.

"Yeah, it's fine," Jay said, jumping off the alligator as fast he jumped on. The gator ran away and splashed into the pond.

Nestled in the San Luis Valley in Mosca, Colorado only a few miles away from the Great Sand Dunes is Colorado Gators. The gator farm, as Jay calls it, is actually a part of the fish farm his parents created in 1977. The family then started rescuing animals and eventually accumulated about 400 alligators along with various kinds of exotic fish, turtles, snakes, crocodiles, caimans, emus, and ostriches.

Jay's family rescues most of the alligators, about 160 of them, from people who can no longer care for them as pets. A gator calmly floating on the pond was Jager, a college student's pet from a Colorado university.

"It must have been a drinking college," Jay said.

Jay is the boss and head instructor at Colorado Gators. For \$100 the public can enroll in an alligator wrestling class. Students start by wrestling 2-foot gators and gradually work up to 10-foot to 11-footers -- some as heavy as 600 pounds.

Wrestling the alligators is often necessary to check them for wounds from alligator fights or to medicate them for illnesses.

"We're just using the students as free labor," Jay said.

The alligator wrestling classes started after Jay taught a local radio personality how to handle alligators. The next year, somebody else asked to wrestle and alligator wrestling classes became a permanent fixture at the gator farm.

Participants sign a waiver, but Jay has no insurance. "Picture, if you will the courtroom setting and the judge says, 'Ok, you signed up for an alligator wrestling class and you got bit. What part of that sounded like a good idea in the first place?'" Jay said.

There have been injuries. While the Discovery channel was filming, a girl lifted her weight off a gator. The alligator snapped and bit her over the eye. The gator farm employees patched her up, and she finished the rest of the class before she went to the hospital.

After examining the refrigerator-sized alligator, Jay spotted another gator trapped in a blue, plastic tub whipping its tail. Jay's Hawaiian shirt whirled, and he caught the gator and released it back to the pen in a matter of moments.

The key to alligator wrestling, Jay said, is "don't hesitate and don't let go."

"Fear causes hesitation, and hesitation causes your worst fears to come true," he said, stealing a line from bank robber/extreme surfer Bodhi in the movie "Point Break."

"If you let go halfway and hesitate because you're scared, that's when you get bit."

Jay Young grew up in nearby Alamosa and helped out at the small fish farm when he was a child, although initially there was not a lot of work.

It wasn't until 1991, when Jay was 17 years old, that his parents introduced alligators to the farm and enlisted Jay as their future gator wrangler and wrestler.

"That'd be the first time I was in over my head," Jay said. His father, who did most of the work, taught Jay how to handle alligators.

After graduating from high school in Alamosa, Jay attended Colorado State University to study engineering. Two years later, in 1996, he realized he couldn't work behind a desk and moved back to Alamosa.

Jay then held a variety of jobs -- usually outside and always physical.

He now lives across the street from his snapping, hissing employees.

As the sun dropped over the western mountains, Jay spotted an escaped 5-foot alligator that appeared to be sunbathing on the path around the pens. Jay took a step forward and then pounced on it, just as it started to hiss.

For gators shorter than five feet, the best wrestling technique involves simultaneously grabbing the alligator's neck and tail, holding tight as the alligator bends and twists its body trying to break free. Jay wrapped his arms around the gator and threw it back into the pen where it landed with a splash.

Students often try to hold the alligator's mouth shut, which can be a costly mistake. Although the alligator's jaws don't have a lot of strength to open, they can easily cut a person when they thrash their head back and forth.

"Most people are physically capable of wrestling alligators," Jay said. Most problems, he said, arise in the face of fear.

Jay says alligator wrestling doesn't scare him. When he was 5 years old, he was bitten by a caiman (a member of the crocodilian family). After that, he knew he could survive a bite and was no longer afraid.

Does he have scars?

"Yeah, I got scars," he said, "I used to be married to redhead."

Although Jay admits he's nipped about once a year, most of the bites do little damage. His worst scar isn't from an alligator bite but a trailer accident. When he was 9 years old, he hit his head against the window in a truck pulling a trailer, knocking him out cold. He then fell out of the truck and three wheels from the axle ran over his left shin. He walked on crutches for two years.

Jay's shirt was still wet and stained with mud when he wrestled his next alligator for the day, Chompers. The 10-foot long, 400-pound alligator lay out on the ground with his arms and legs spread, as though recovering from a belly flop onto dry land. Jay grabbed its tail and pulled it into an open space to check a leg cut. A missing piece of flesh about the size of postcard on the alligator's back leg was healing nicely.

To catch an alligator between 8 and 10 feet, Jay tells his students to grab the gator's tail and jump on its back as quickly as possible. The key, he said, is to drive the students' weight on top of the gator and firmly put their hands at the alligator's neck. Then, students should crane the gator's neck upward. The alligators do not have as much power to thrash and turn their mouths when their heads are elevated.

Jay and his wife, Erin, a brunette, celebrated their third year anniversary on October 30th.

"I never thought I'd find a woman crazy enough to hang out with me." Jay said.

They met at a bar in Creede, Colorado, where a mutual friend was playing in a band. On their second date, she took the gator wrestling class from him.

"He told me, 'If we're going to continue, you have to take the wrestling class.'" Erin said.

"Yeah, she jumped in right away," Jay said.

Erin works at the shop now and has taught a few classes but focuses more on overseeing the business and caring for the animals.

Jay also has an 8 year-old daughter, Samantha, who wrestles alligators just like her dad. The little girl held her first alligator when she was 18 months old. Recently, the 8 year-old stunned a visitor by tackling an escaped alligator in her home. The visitor didn't believe the little girl could do it.

Signs near the entrance of the gator farm read, "Beyond this place there be dragons" and "This facility has been accident free for hours." A net camouflaged with fake leaves hangs from the rusted metal ceiling and aquariums line the walls. Visitors can peer through the glass containers at Texas Rat Snakes, Woodhouse's Toads, Chubby Frogs, or Smooth Green Snakes.

For Jay, alligator wrestling is only one part of Colorado Gators.

Jay has big plans to expand the fish farm. He has set up one "biotent," – an inflatable building covered with a solar tarp that traps heat from sunlight creating a warm air environment. This method has enabled the farm to triple its fish production. They sell the fish alive and deliver them mostly to oriental markets.

Still, he said, the farm couldn't operate without the gators.

"Tourism pays the bills," Jay said.

An hour later Jay chucked deer guts from a road kill into an alligator pen and watched as the alligators converged and ripped the organs apart. His hands were covered in blood and intestines.

"You can't really call it work, man," he said. "I've been playing here."

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