



DEFENDING YOUR FRIEND

Java, a Cape Lion. His kind has been extinct in the wild since about the turn of the century. They lived in parts of South Africa through what's now known as Zimbabwe. They are distinctly different from the more common African lion by the extent of their belly mane, which reaches from the head all the way to the back legs under the stomach. A few of these magnificent creatures were captured and placed in zoos and circuses in South Africa, Europe and the United States. Java is a remnant from a few brought to this country. He is spectacular in appearance and extremely large.

One day when I was in with him, he became very playful. He only weighed about four hundred pounds at the time, but was very good at moving it around. He decided to get me. His eyes were wide and piercing and well focused - a sure sign of an impending charge. He gained speed quickly and so did I. I headed for the nearest habitat fence, but I knew I wasn't going to make it in time.

The best way to handle a playful lion, whose intent is to tackle you, of course, is to run to the nearest large, solid, yet flexible object, like a fence, turn, raise one leg up into his chest, that is, about head high, and block with both arms together. This prevents his open mouth from engulfing your head. Naturally, if the lion is playing, it's very effective. If he is not, there is no need to bother. By the way, timing is critical. If you raise your leg too soon, you will have trouble holding it up long enough to meet the challenge. If your leg is too low or too late, you will receive the full impact. Remember, if the lion you are with is like Java, his mouth will be open.

In this particular incident I didn't make it to the fence. I turned and blocked Java with my arms as I leaned into him with the proper stance, lowering my center of gravity. His weight hurtled me backward — and he landed on me.

As I opened my eyes, I saw Saja, an eighty-three pound leopard jump from a nearby platform and hit the lion in the air. She knocked him off me. Then Brendel, a large Siberian tigress, who had seen the rough play, raced in and laid across Java, so he couldn't get up. It seemed like a good time to leave.

Saja risked her life to save me. She gave no thought to her own life, but only considered me, her friend. She freely chose to save me. I believe this is the definition of the greatest love — to give your life for another. We can't do more.

It is also noteworthy to mention that Java and several species of big cats have intervened and saved both my wife and myself on a fair number of occasions. They truly do defend their friends.