

Last day in Thailand | Andrews Blog

Day 3

The final day of our Thailand workshop. We began the day again at the mahout school where the elephants with behavioural problems of some form were all lined up. The fellow who is the head of training wanted to this time show me the groundwork skills of the problem elephants. This confirmed all my suspicions about the holes in the groundwork. The elephants were mostly fidgety and unable to stand still. In order to make the elephant stay still many just used ad lib feeding to distract the elephant from moving rather than train him to remain immobile. We had a good discussion about remedying this and the head trainer was certainly open to the suggestion.

We then went to the training camp to begin our work with the three elephants. Firstly Kaew was brought in and this time I stressed the importance of making this day perfect and remembering the lessons that we repeated ad infinitum the day before (for the mahouts benefit). This time the work on the ground was 90% improved and Kaew was far more relaxed. So we only did a few repetitions of stop, back, stay and forward. It was clear that when the training was correct, the elephant would remain relaxed. We then switched to some trunk work. From the first repetition Kaew picked up the stick on command, raised it and released it to the mahout. Because she is so young and had done so well we decided to leave it and do a few more short repetitions in the afternoon. Her work in the afternoon was also good and so we finished our time with her emphasising the importance of clarity and timing.

Yaya was also foot perfect in all our work both in the morning and in the afternoon. Her groundwork was now far more relaxed and she had learned to wait to be asked to move and so all the nervousness had gone. The amazing thing about elephants is that they can generalise quite easily so picking up a stick was easily transferred to picking up the mahout's hat and she started to improve in actually placing it on her mahout's head. Once again we quitted because all of the things we required of her were now managed very well and her calmness was clear to see.

Kaelang was next and again I targeted groundwork. At one point I had to step in to remind the mahouts about being very fastidious about consistent responses as they were sometimes a bit inconsistent. I showed them again that when she stood still, they should move away from her in all directions to test and correct when she tried to walk forward or sideways and then reward her immobility. The mahouts did an excellent job here so we decided now to check her work when ridden. This was quite flawless – she moved quietly and relaxed in forward, faster, slower turn, step back and stay.

So this was the end of my Thailand workshop. I finished with a thank you to all 30 mahouts that attended from the Thai mahout centre and the Royal stables (the king's elephants). They gave an enthusiastic applause. I also wanted to thank Bjarne Clausen and the Danish Animal Welfare Society for their organisation and funding assistance for this workshop. My thanks also to Sittidet from the National Elephant Institute for his support and translations. And again, huge thanks to all those in Australia and abroad who donated for these workshops to continue.

