

ELEPHANT USE AND WELFARE OBSERVATIONS

JORDAN WORLD CIRCUS



March 2026

Field Report by

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PURPOSE & SCOPE

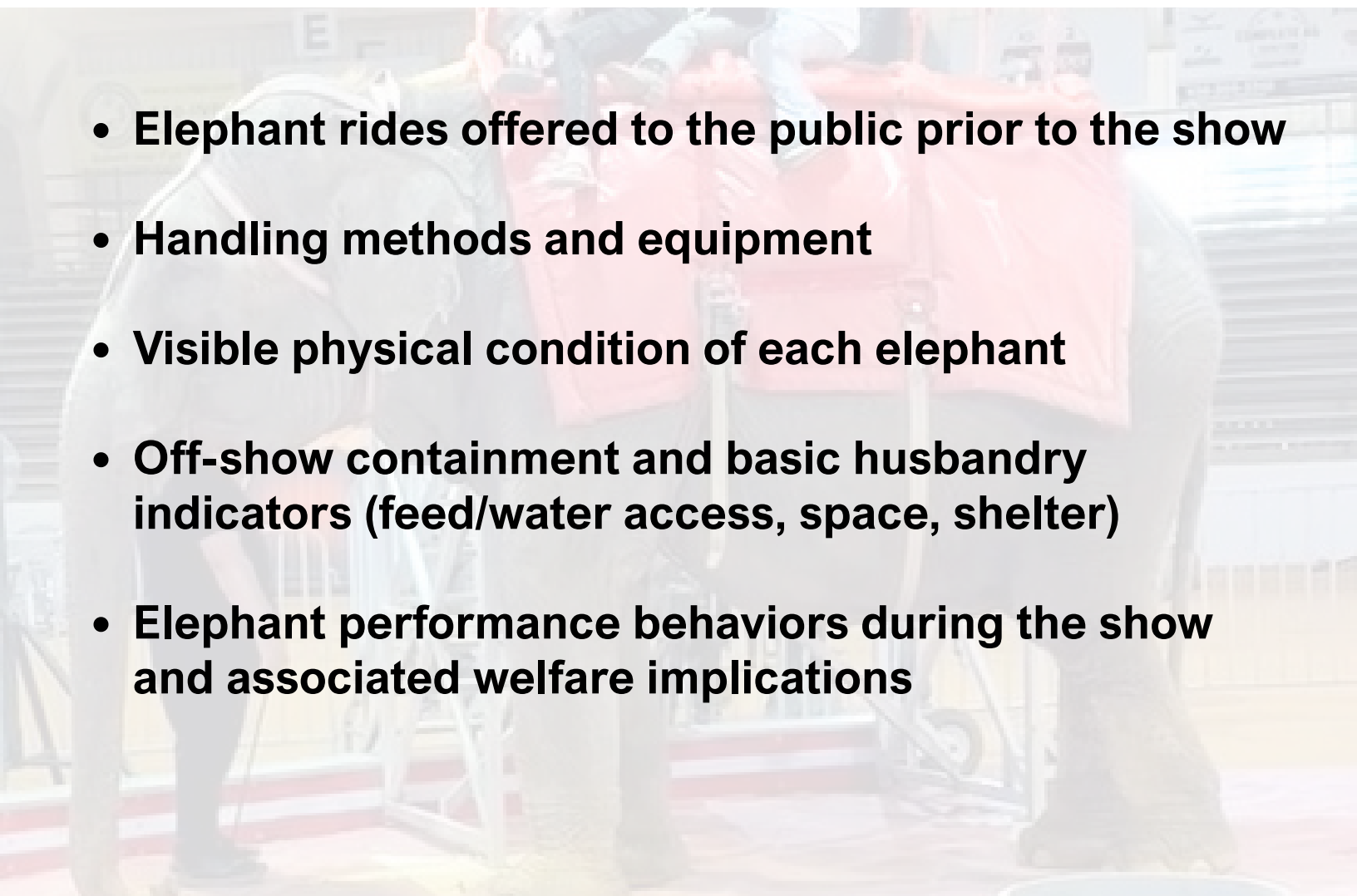
Primary Focus

Elephant public rides, off-show housing, and performance acts

Elephants Observed

Viola & Isa (leased from supplier Carson & Barnes)

This report documents first-hand observations made during a visit to Jordan World Circus in Nacogdoches, TX on February 21, 2026. The scope is limited to what was directly observed from public access areas, with specific attention to:

- **Elephant rides offered to the public prior to the show**
 - **Handling methods and equipment**
 - **Visible physical condition of each elephant**
 - **Off-show containment and basic husbandry indicators (feed/water access, space, shelter)**
 - **Elephant performance behaviors during the show and associated welfare implications**
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I hold a PhD in Animal Welfare Science from the School of Biological Sciences, University of Bristol, where my thesis examined the practices and legislation of zoos. I received a Bachelor of Science degree with honors in Zoology from University College London in 1998. I received a Master of Science degree in Primatology from University College London in 1999.

I was employed by the Born Free Foundation, UK, from May 2004 through December 2020, becoming Head of Animal Welfare and Captivity in 2017. In that role, I was responsible for the operation of Born Free's wild animal sanctuaries in Ethiopia, South Africa, and India; as well as overseeing the organization's research, policy, and advocacy on animal welfare and wild animals in captivity.

I then worked at the Performing Animal Welfare Society (PAWS), USA from December 2020 through February 2025, where I was Chief Operations Officer (2020-2024) and then Chief Executive Officer (Feb 2024-Feb 2025). While there, I led the organization's sanctuary and global animal welfare programs and was responsible for the operations of the Ark 2000 wild animal sanctuary in California, the first elephant sanctuary in the USA.

I am a member of the Accreditation Committee of the Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries (GFAS), a Fellow of the Royal Society of Biology, a Fellow of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics, an Advisor to the Whale Sanctuary Project, a Former Member of the Zoos Expert Committee for the Governments in the United Kingdom, a Former Member of the Wild Animal Welfare Committee in the United Kingdom, and a Former Member of the Editorial Board for the UK Journal of Animal Law.

I have authored multiple scholarly publications in my field, and given multiple invited presentations across the globe on animal welfare science, conservation biology, zoos, and exotic animals in captivity; I have provided Parliamentary Presentations and Testimony on topics including wild animals in circuses, and licensing and inspection in zoos, among other topics.

I have previously been retained to observe and provide recommendations on elephants in captivity in countries including, but not limited to, Sri Lanka, India, USA, Mexico, UK, Ireland, South Africa, France, Spain, and Italy. I was involved in the retirement and movement of the last circus elephant in England, and have been central to the rescue and retirement of numerous wild animals rescued from zoos and circuses to lifetime sanctuaries.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Key Welfare Concerns From Observed Evidence

Use of bullhook during public rides

with frequent tapping by a primary handler (no significant force observed, but frequency notable).

Close public proximity to elephants

with only a waist-high lightweight temporary barrier.

Visible skin dryness/scurf

on both elephants; possible localized lesion on Isa's right temple region

Foot health concerns

including chronic overgrowth in both elephants and an apparent acute nail issue on Viola's left front nail #4, plus cracked heels/interdigital concerns.

Gait/limb concern

in Viola (right front wrist flexion reduced during circular ride work).

Restricted space

in the off-show pen limiting meaningful movement.

Performance behaviors with likely biomechanical stress

including sitting upright on tubs, step-down/drop behaviors, and tight spinning with a rider on the shoulders.

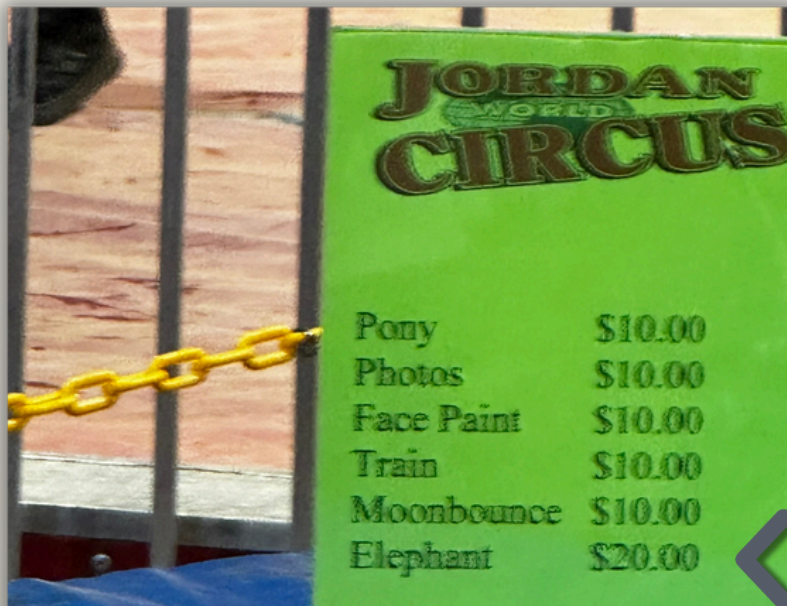
Potential abnormal ingestion (Viola eating sand)

which may be incidental but is relevant as a husbandry/welfare note.

PRE-SHOW PAID ACTIVITY

Elephant Rides

Both elephants wore a saddle/howdah and were used to provide rides to adults and children.



Ride area set-up and public proximity

- Elephant rides were conducted in one of the three circus rings.
- The ring was surrounded by a lightweight temporary fence intended to separate the public from the elephants.
- Visitors were frequently close to the fence, including instances of individuals leaning on it.

Handlers and equipment

- Two adult male handlers were present.
- Both carried thin bullhooks, which were commonly held by the hook end, with the handle used for contact.
- One handler, described as the main trainer/presenter and believed to be Armando Loyal, used the bullhook frequently to tap the elephants, particularly on the backs of the legs, while they conducted ride circuits. No significant force was observed, but the frequency of tapping was notable.

Physical Condition and Behavior Observations

Viola

Isa

Demeanor, Trunk Activity

Calm and alert, though behavior was difficult to interpret while continuously engaged in ride work.

Trunk was mobile and used occasionally to investigate the environment.

Observed eating sand for several minutes (small amounts, repeated placement of sand into the mouth).

Active and alert but subdued and disinterested relative to surrounding activity.

Trunk was mobile, but used relatively little for investigation or self-grooming compared with typical elephant self-directed behavior.

Isa often appeared inert unless directed to move or perform maneuvers.



Viola

Isa

Skin

Skin appeared dry and in places scurfy, especially around the backs of the legs and the head.

Typical thickened/callused tissue was visible on eye ridges and hips, consistent with long-term captive management and likely contact with hard surfaces.

Skin appeared dry and scurfy, especially on the backs of the legs and brow ridges.

On the right temporal region, in addition to scurfiness, there appeared to be evidence suggestive of an injury or infection. (See photo) Close-up assessment was not possible.

Toenails

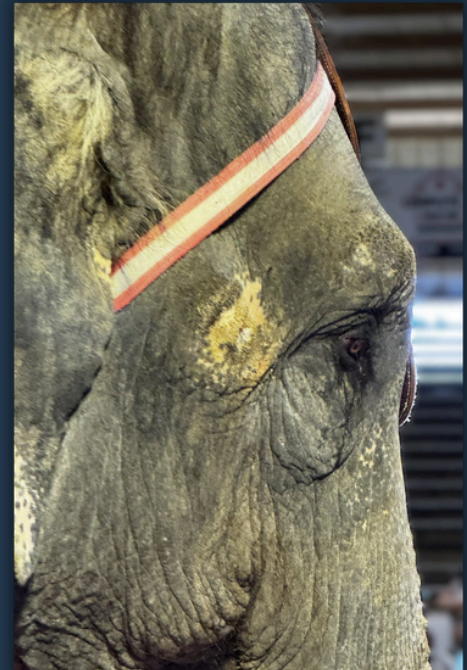
Nail #4 (second from the outside) of the left front foot appeared abnormal, with apparent separation at the quick, dark discoloration, and visible separation when weight-bearing. The cuticle area and above appeared swollen. (See photo)

Nails overall appeared chronically overgrown. Heels appeared cracked; interdigital/cuticle condition was consistent with an older captive elephant with imperfect long-term foot care. Soles were not observed.

Nails appeared chronically overgrown, consistent with limited opportunity for natural wear.

No clear acute nail problem was observed, though cracked heels and possible issues in interdigital spaces were noted.

Soles were not observed.



Viola

Body Condition

Right front limb/wrist: While made to walk in circles while being ridden by visitors, she appeared reluctant or unable to bend the right front wrist, shuffling the leg forward without visible flexion. When walking in a straighter line, she appeared more able to bend the wrist, so the cause (pain vs ring geometry vs both) could not be determined from observation.

When seen without the saddle/howdah, a pronounced spinal ridge and pronounced pelvic ridge were visible. Overall she appeared overweight, but with signs consistent with being under-muscled/out of condition.



CONFINEMENT

Off-Show Housing, Containment, and Husbandry Indicators

Location and containment

When not providing rides or performing, the elephants were kept in a small penned area near their transport trailer outside the rear of the Expo barn/center.

Containment appeared to include an electric wire (or what appeared to be a former electric wire set-up). It was not possible to confirm whether the wire was active/energized or its exact configuration.

Hay feeding was observed. It was not possible to assess hay quality, total quantities offered, or whether water was available

Substrate and space

The ground surface appeared to be grass, dirt, or sand (not confirmed). The elephants did not appear able to move in any significant capacity within the temporary pen.

Chaining indicators

The elephants were not observed to be chained. On Viola, a smoother indented band-like area around the front left wrist was observed, possibly consistent with past or recent chaining/shackling, though this may be an older deformation.



Trailer access and shelter

The transport trailer doors were open. It did not appear that the trailer was accessible to the elephants at that time, though visibility was limited.

The elephants appeared to be under cover. Weather conditions were not hot and sun exposure did not appear to present an acute heat risk during the observation period.

DURING THE SHOW

Performance Observations

Both elephants were directed to perform behaviors involving tubs and tight turns, including:

- Sitting upright on tubs
- Stepping down from tubs onto the front feet, estimated drop of approximately 2–3 feet, including an apparent moment of landing onto one front foot
- Spinning in a tight circumference around/near the tub

A performer sat on the elephants' shoulders during portions of these behaviors, wearing a bright costume. The elephants wore adornments including a headdress and anklets.

Professional assessment of biomechanical concerns

These behaviors are not typical of elephant natural locomotion and posture. The following welfare concerns are reasonably associated with the observed acts:

- **Upright sitting postures on props: potential increased strain on joints and spine**
- **Repeated step-down/drop behaviors: potentially high impact forces on feet and joints, possibly contributing to chronic musculoskeletal and foot pathology over time**
- **Tight spinning: potential cumulative stress to joints, feet, and connective tissue**

RECOMMENDATIONS

Veterinary Priorities

Viola

- Left front nail #4 separation/discoloration; evaluate for infection, abscessing, or trauma; assess sole condition and overall foot balance.
- Right front wrist/forelimb flexion issue; rule out pain, arthritis, ligament injury, or foot pain.

Isa

- Right temple region lesion; evaluate for infection, trauma, dermatitis, or chronic irritation

Current evaluation limitations

- Observations were made from public-access areas; off-show areas were not visible in detail.
- Water availability, food quality/quantity, enclosure dimensions, wire electrification status, and full foot sole condition could not be confirmed.
- Several health observations (Isa temple region; Viola nail separation; possible wrist banding) would benefit from review of close-up images and veterinary examination.



CONCLUSION

My observations of Viola and Isa give me significant cause for concern regarding their physical and psychological health, and for the health and safety of both elephants and circus visitors. It is my firm recommendation that both Viola and Isa receive prompt expert and independent veterinary assessment and treatment.

Viola is elderly (at least for a captive elephant) at 56 years old, and appears to exhibit the results of poor footcare and the negative effects of a travelling circus life. There is evidence that her mobility is reduced. **Considering the forces and stresses involved in road transport, and coupled with continued demands to perform in the circus ring and to provide rides, I strongly expect Viola's debilitating foot problems to continuously worsen if she stays in this environment.** Every mile she travels while standing in a trailer, every minute spent in constant confinement to pitifully small holding areas, and every repetitive turn in tight circles is making the situation worse, and making the likelihood of significant pain and suffering increase.

Moreover, I am convinced that life on the road and being used for rides and in performances is entirely incompatible with even basic welfare standards for these and other elephants. I am concerned that the already-compromised health of both elephants will deteriorate further should they continue to be subjected to the rigors of an unrelenting tour where they're forced to perform unnatural tricks, carry riders, and travel by road day after day.

Finally, I am concerned that the public safety aspects of continuing to use elephants like Viola and Isa in travelling circuses have been ignored for too long. These are exceptionally dangerous wild animals being used for tricks and rides mere inches from visitors and without adequate barriers. There is a very high risk of escape under these conditions, which could very likely result in the elephants injuring themselves and/or humans. Indeed, I understand that both Viola and Isa have a history of escaping from circus events, and have sustained multiple injuries and damaged property when doing so. According to reports, Viola has tried to run away from her trainers at least four times. Under the circumstances, the only question is not if but when such an emergency will happen next, and whether it will be even more disastrous.