
Famous On All Fours

by andrew dowler

Mike Klingbell is one of that rare breed that has a 'way' with animals. For his furry friends there's no pussyfooting around. Training his temperamental 'stars' for film and television is no easy task, but it's the least of his problems.

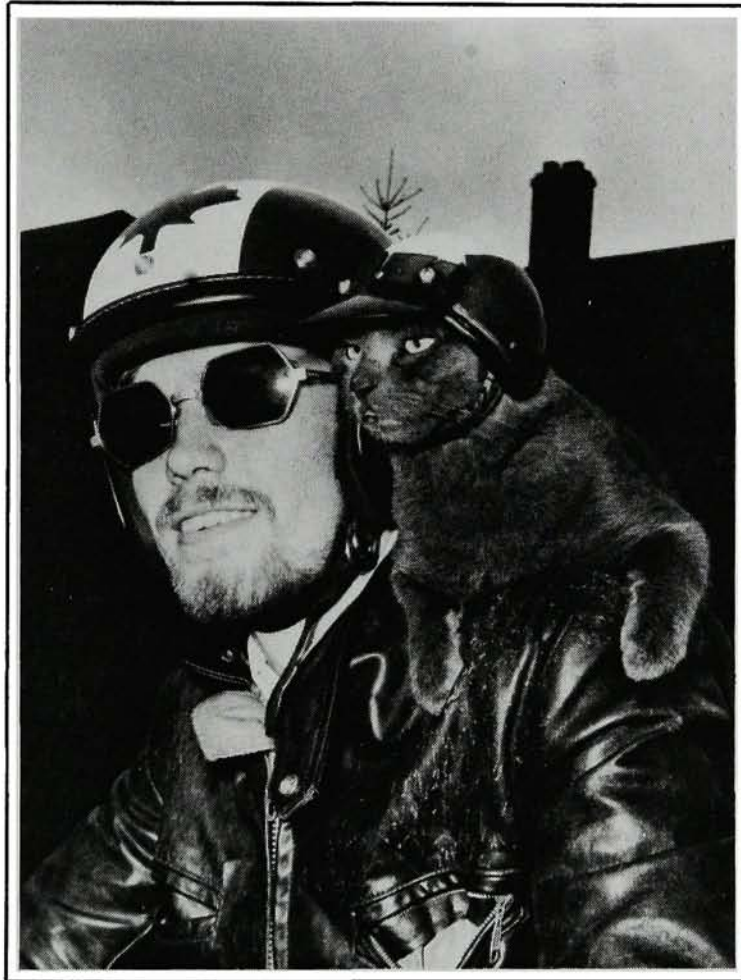


photo: Lauro Boccioletti

Mike Klingbell with hot rod "Maria" in her custom-made helmet

Training animals is no problem for Mike Klingbell — it's training film crews that gives the heartache. On nine jobs out of ten, here and in the States, he says directors, producers, crew members and actors are unaware of the potential of trained animals, and the conditions needed to fulfill that potential. "I've been having directors tell me I can't take a cat out on the street and have it do what I want." But it was just that — taking a cat out on the street — that got Mike into the animal training business in the first place.

He began training animals in his mid-teens in Cabbagetown, Toronto, when a girlfriend brought home a kitten. "At the time, we were in the habit of spending one night at home, and the next a couple of hundred miles away, not just for the day, but for a couple of days. We couldn't leave the kitten alone, so we took it with us. One time, we went to Niagara Falls and spent three hours chasing it around. The kitten was having a wonderful time, up trees and all. But

Andrew Dowler is a free-lance writer, and a York University film graduate who has worked on a variety of film projects.



Stephen Roth with his incognito cohort, and Mike Klingbell with "Baby". Plenty of fur to fly!

we were beat! That's when I decided that kitten was going to learn something. So, I sat down and started talking to him and, to my great surprise, he listened and he learned."

A second cat proved twice as easy to train, so Mike trained it for things that were twice as hard. "What I really became famous for was having a cat on a motorcycle, complete with a motorcycle helmet. And I was able to ride the freeways in Toronto, do hairpin turns and dead stops and have the cat balance itself."

Pictures of Mike and his balancing cat made the papers and were seen by Rupert MacNee, then producer of a television series called *Friends of Man*. He tacked a photo to the bulletin board with a notice to his staff: "If you see this guy, bring him in!"

They brought him in and he went to work on the series. When it ended, MacNee told him he had talent and suggested he develop it.

From 1974 to 1976, Mike Klingbell worked for minimum wage in Hollywood as a trainer's trainer — an apprentice. His greatest pride came from preparing the canine lead in the recent re-make of **Call of the Wild**. The dog was inexperienced and unco-operative. It spent the first three

weeks trying to eat his arm. Mike worked up to eighteen hours a day, eating and sleeping with the dog, for three months, to make it a star. Finally, the dog went on location with a handler — a man who works an already-trained animal — and the production company returned from the shoot singing the dog's praises.

Animal training is a skill calling for patience and sensitivity. "There are certain steps you have to go through in approaching the animal, greeting him, and letting him accept you for who you are. Wolves will bounce up and down as a form of greeting. I've had wolves in captivity, and the first time I've met them, I've started bouncing up and down and bobbing my head up and down, and they recognized that as a sign of 'hello.'

"With a wild animal, I'll get on its own turf. I'll go into the cage with it, I'll lie down and let it put its head on my lap and I'll go to sleep. I'll show that animal that I will open myself vulnerably to it and it will accept that. I will contain my fear within myself, because if that's what you give the animal, that's what it will give you back. It will become more afraid of you and will protect itself.

"An animal has a buffer zone around it, and once you

get inside that area, the animal feels threatened. The range of the area depends on how you walk and how you stand. You can contest the ground an animal stands on just by standing in front of him. I do that a lot with an animal to make him upset, so that he can learn that he can calm down without hurting anybody."

This, in itself, is not training, but a necessary preliminary. "You have to condition an animal to training, and then the training must be taken so far, in so many steps. You can't go too fast, because you will scare the daylight out of the animal." A scared animal learns and performs badly.

Mike ended his apprenticeship when the compound he worked for was sold and the new owners decided not to make him a full trainer. Since then he has free-lanced in the States and Canada. He has handled Dobermans on **Embryo**, a jaguar on **Agency**, has worked on **The Invisible Man**, **The Waltons**, and countless commercials — including the Neo-Citran-man-buried-to-his-armpits-in-snow-at-bus-stop-rescued-by-St-Bernard.

He has worked bears, tigers, chimpanzees, pythons, parrots and raccoons. He has also done some acting, appearing in **The Shape of Things to Come**, **Phobia**, **Agency**, **Fast Company** and **High Point**.

Most of his work comes in response to the talent of his two cats: Tiara, and Maria, a Russian Blue. Maria has done a number of commercials and performed in **Agency** and **Something's Rotten**. Both cats were featured in the CBC's *Northern Lights* (aired in January), looking properly sinister and intent as killer cats determined to protect their inheritance from a greedy nephew.

"Basically, everybody has always thought that you can't train cats. That's something I think dog trainers have put out just to discourage people from owning cats."

He claims that training any animal, even a cat, is not difficult. "The animals already know everything that I am going to bring out in them. They know how to run and sit and so on. All I do is teach them a vocabulary. When they hear a sound or see a gesture, they give me back a certain response, therefore, I reward them. They think and they rationalize and they dream. Give them better food than they're used to and they understand that. They know when they see the canned crab meat that they're going to be expected to do something, and do it right. But when you're training an animal, just give it little bits of food — more as an incentive than as a reward.

"There are times when it won't want to do what you want it to do, and it will rebel. Then you have to show it that you are what you are, and it is what it is, and it has to do what you want or it won't get the special food. It will get a whack on the snout instead!"

Right now, Maria is halfway through her attack training. "I can get an animal to show viciousness or friendliness. That's necessary, because I've seen things where an animal is supposed to be attacking, but what he's been given is a command to run up and put his paws on an actor, and the difference shows."

Mike and Maria have a lot of work lined up. He expects her to be worth half a million dollars by the year's end.

With all this in store, Mike Klingbell is thinking of quitting the business.

"People won't let me do my job. They won't give me time to train the animal; or, I will spend days, weeks, even months getting an animal ready to do something and then, a day or two before, or sometimes when I get on the set, they'll say, 'This isn't what we want. Why isn't the animal doing what we want?' Well, it isn't doing what they want because it doesn't know what they want. They've changed the script. You have to physically show the animal, dozens of times, what it has to do."

Changes in the script are not the only problems. "In the States, I've seen whole sets built months in advance on the compound for the animals to train on. This is what will get the good performance. Up here, I've asked for props that will be used on the set and it's 'Nope. Can't have them.'"

The problems are the same whether the budget is large or small. Animals, like people, work best in familiar surroundings. "You need to give the animal time to get accustomed to the set. It takes about an hour, and sometimes people don't want to do that, and they get a little bit arrogant and a little bit loud about it, and that perturbs the animal. I had an incident once where an electrician threw a pair of pliers into his toolbox about four of five feet away, something he does every day, but he didn't stop to think that there was an animal on set. When it gets to that point, where people ruin my work, I get very upset and come down on them like a ton of bricks. It happens a lot and it's especially bad when someone else, an actor, is holding the animal. I'll get upset long before the animal will, because if that animal gets upset, they'll have to pay everyone to stand around while it calms down, and the animal will be twice as hard to train next time and will be reluctant to work." There is also the chance of a frightened animal biting someone.

Most of the problems Mike Klingbell describes seem to stem from simple ignorance. It would be a pity if such a simple problem drove him out of the business: he's one of the few specialists in his field that the Canadian film industry has. □

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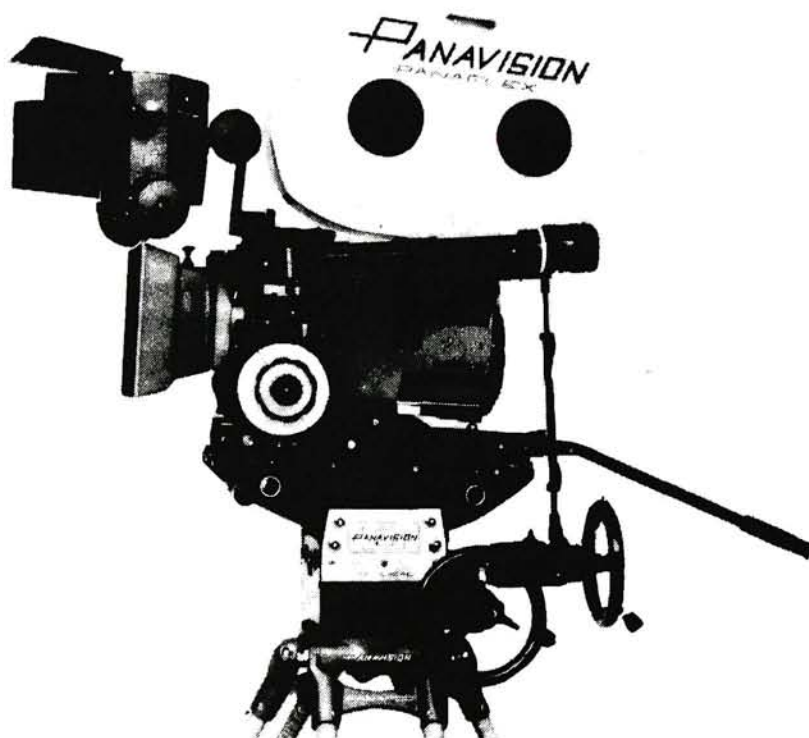
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