

The rat stuff

Trained rodents strut in olympic finale

By Ted Taylor
Staff Reporter

Doc doesn't look like a potential olympic champion.

She's pretty small, pretty light. She has a long, white tail and a very small brain.

But at Nebraska Wesleyan's 19th annual Rat Olympics Saturday, Doc has a decent chance of bringing home the gold ... or at least a snack.

She is one of 31 "rathletes" training for Saturday's competition, the finale of a psychology learning and motivation course.

The rat games began in 1975, and Ken Keith, chairman of the Wesleyan psychology department, took over in 1980.

"It has changed a little," he said, "but it seemed like a worthwhile thing to continue."

All semester, students have spent about an hour with the rodents each day, using theories learned in class to train them.

Students are graded on the semester's laboratory activities, Keith said, not the quality of the rat's performance.

"It has a serious purpose," he said, "and it's a nice way to lighten up the work in the lab."

Doc belongs to senior psychology major Nicole Long, who says her little competitor might not win anything but will put up a good fight.

"I don't know if she'll be coming away with the gold," Long said, "but she'll be consistent in all the events."

The all-female competition consists of seven events: the 5-yard dash, the 4-foot tightrope walk, weight lifting, 5-yard hurdles, the long jump, the 5-foot rope climb and the speed press.

Doc's best event, Long said proudly, is the tightrope walk.

"Through shaping and reinforcement, we get them to do what we want," Long said. "We give them rewards — like food pellets — when they complete tasks."

But getting the rats to cooperate can be tricky.

"They have been easy to work with for the most part," she said. "But they're just like humans. There are days when they don't want to do a thing."

Keith offers advice to his frustrated rat trainers in the form of a quote from Fred Keller, former Columbia University behaviorist: "The rat is always right. The rat does exactly what we teach them to do."



Bret Gottschall/DN

Keith and his students said the Rat Olympics were a fun way to learn about behavior. And they are learning.

"It teaches important skills about the application of behavior principles to teaching and managing complex behavior."

Sophomore bio-psychology major Adam Christensen called his experience with his rathlete, Eliza Jane, very educational.

"It has definitely helped a lot with the application of the theories from the class we're taking," he said.

Junior bio-psychology major Angela Murray said she never thought she would be able to stomach touching a rat.

"If it wasn't required, I probably wouldn't have taken it," she said. "But it has been a great learning experience, and it's helped me get over a phobia."

Murray said her rat, Snowball, also was a favorite in the tightrope competition.

"She can't do the weight lifting at all."

But what will happen Saturday evening, after all the awards have been handed out and the months of strenuous training have come to an end?

Don't look for Doc and Snowball on the front of a Wheaties box. Keith said the students can adopt the rats at the end of the semester for \$9. Those who aren't adopted go to science classes at other schools, to research or ... to zoos where they become food for large birds or snakes.

Snowball, for example, will go to an elementary school.

"My mom is a second-grade teacher in Ord," Murray said. "So they are going to adopt her."

The rat games begin at 8 a.m. in the Great Hall of the Smith-Curtis Classroom-Administration Building on the Nebraska Wesleyan campus. It is free and open to the public.

Remember, this is only an exhibition; please, no wagering.

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