

# College rodents shoot for gold at Wesleyan

BY SARAH BAKER  
Senior staff writer

Imagine being blind and trying to jump over the Grand Canyon.

And then imagine the only prize after completing this death-defying feat is a few measly pellets of food that certainly don't look all that appetizing.

That's the situation that Pink, Fluffy and about a dozen other rats faced Saturday at the 22<sup>nd</sup> annual Rat Olympics.

The olympics, a long standing tradition at Nebraska Wesleyan University, attracts crowds year after year as the rodents compete in events such as the long jump, the 5-foot rope climb and the speed press.

And in the world of competitive sport, some rats are definitely superior to others.

"She is not one of our star rats," Jeff Meese, a sophomore psychology major, said of his rat, Pink.

Pink was not faring well in the long jump, an event in which two platforms are placed farther and farther apart. The rat, which has been trained to respond to the sound of jingling keys, is expected to jump across the expanse.

"She does it, but just not fast enough," Meese said. "She's done better in the other events though."

The rats are trained to respond to sound, because though they are nearly blind, they have excellent hearing.

"(Pink) can't even see as far as she jumps," Meese said.

The blindness could explain the fright some of the rats seemed to feel before their jumps, some of them even experiencing loss of bladder control. In other cases, wild platform jumps in the wrong direction resulted in crash landings on the white tile floor.

Discomfort also afflicted the rat "parents" - their student owners. One was scratching furiously at a batch of hives resulting from her rat's fur. Others had their hands covered by

their rodents' messes.

The rats are trained as part of Wesleyan Professor Ken Keith's Learning and Motivation course.

Keith, chairman of the Wesleyan psychology department, said because of the Olympic-style events, the course has become one of the most popular in the college.

Keith said the students take away more than just an unusual experience from the class.

"A number of these students will go into careers where they will work with kids or disabled patients who don't just do what you tell them to do automatically, he said. "This teaches them how to use the kind of reinforcement tactics they will need."

In addition, Keith said, the experiment gives the students a chance to try out a lot of the material they read about in the textbook for the course.

"This is a lot of fun, but it also has a serious aim," Keith said. "It makes the labs a lot more enjoyable and meaningful."

And for the so-called "star rats," the olympics couldn't have been more exciting.

Leigh Fischer, a junior psychology major at Wesleyan, was pleasantly surprised at her rat Fluffy's performance.

"Fluffy would only jump 3 inches in the lab, but today she has made it up to 37 inches," Fischer said with a grin. "I'm trying to get her to go for 45, but so far she just doesn't have the height."

Fischer and Fluffy tried repeatedly to make the jump, which, according to Keith, would have been a "world record breaker," but to no avail.

Fluffy could launch herself only so high, and made it into Fischer's hand, which was at a lower height than the required platform.

But neither rat nor master seemed too upset. Although Fluffy never made it, the audience seemed pleased with the performance.

One spectator observed, "You gotta be pretty good on the other side to catch a flying rat."

# Russian space module can be seen over Lincoln

By JOSH NICHOLS  
Staff writer

If you are stumbling home from a party at 5 or 6 a.m. and glimpse a light moving across the sky, don't worry. It's not a UFO, and you are not seeing things. You've only spotted Zarya.

Zarya is a space module that was released by Russia 2½ weeks ago and is now visible in Lincoln skies.

The module is the first piece of the International Space Station being developed by the United States, Russia, Germany and other countries.

The space module will be visible for about two to four minutes once every day over Lincoln skies for the next few weeks.

Jack Dunn, Mueller Planetarium coordinator, said if you are looking for the module, it will look like a small glowing dot that moves across the sky.

He said the visibility of the object will depend on the angle of the sun and the location of the module in the sky.

Zarya generally will appear early in the morning around 5 or 6 a.m.

The exact times the module will be visible are on the German Space Operation Center's Web site: <http://www.gsoc.dlr.de/satvis/>.

According to the Web site, the module will be visible Tuesday morning at 5:51 a.m.

UNL Astronomy Professor Martin Gaskell said, "It will be one of the brightest stars in the sky in the morning."

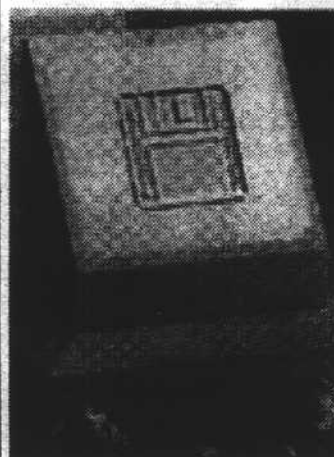


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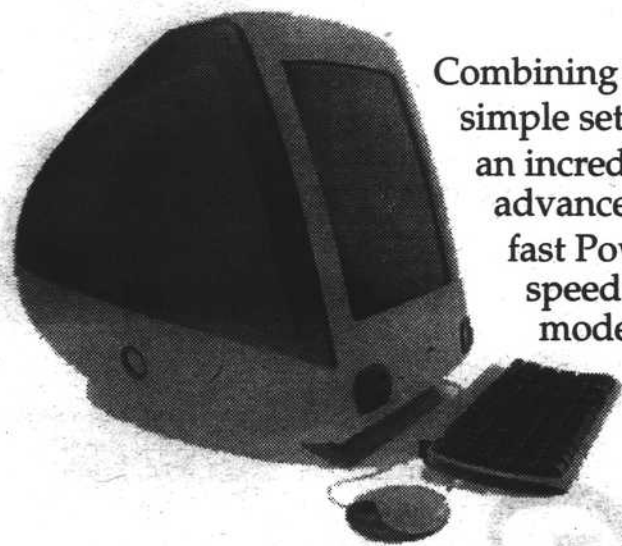
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