

## *Life on a wire*



Photo by Scott Boyes

*Travelling with a circus may sound romantic, but like any job, it has its ups and downs. In this case, hopefully, more ups.*

# IT'S A LIVING

*May 26, 1999*

"I'm frightened more of my wife than of the alligators," Tahar Douis said, a wide grin stretching across his brown, tight-skinned face. "The alligators, they're okay.... I hypnotize the alligators, but" — and here his voice rose an octave as he aped the high-speed chatter of his wife, and then sank again with mock resignation — "I can't do it to her!"

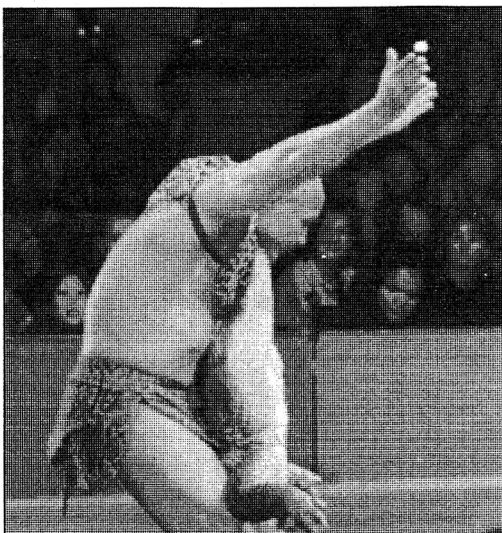
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# Circus life "in the blood"

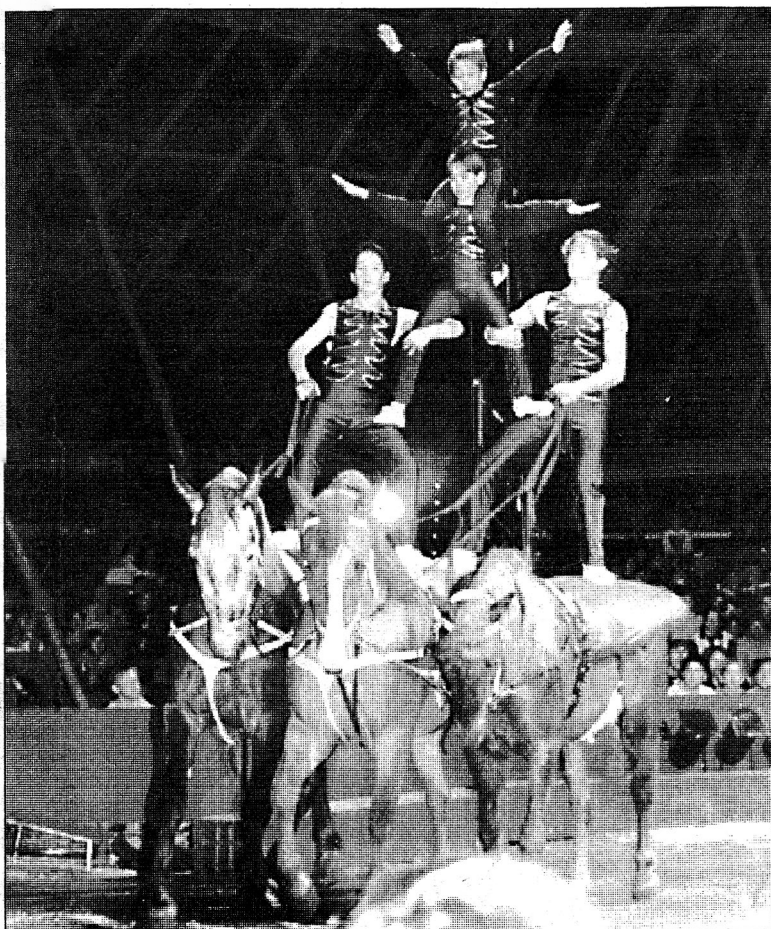


**Not just hot air — a colleague shoots a balloon right out of this archer's mouth. There are definite risks to being a circus performer.**

Photos  
by  
Scott  
Boyes



**Moroccan Tahar Douis gets pumped by applause, not the danger of working with alligators.**



**One of the circus perks: your family is never far away.**

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And with that little tale, Douis — better known as Tahar the Alligator Man — illuminated the backstage life of a circus performer. However mysterious, however magical, the circus is about people — people doing their jobs, raising their families, living day-to-day lives in the shadow of the big top.

Of course, most jobs don't involve dressing in a two-piece leopard skin and sticking your head into the mouth of a nine-foot alligator, as Douis did last Tuesday at the Shrine Circus performances in La Ronge.

But for Douis, a former Ringling Brothers acrobat, such things are just part of the job. After 14 years with the reptiles, he's as comfortable with a gator as another man might be with a briefcase — and he knows all about dealing with lazy, back-stabbing co-workers.

"For the alligator, you and me are all the same. ... The secret about alligators is to be more fast."

Yet cavorting around with a carnivorous reptile is not what gets his adrenaline going.

"You know what makes me excited? The kids!" he said, tossing out another of his easy grins. "When you see that face that's excited, you have to go with it."

While Douis is busy keeping alligators at bay, Joseph Bauer is busy with a balancing act.

"There's a lot of time when I have to stretch (the introductions)," said Bauer, the show's ringmaster, "and the audience doesn't even know, but I'm looking around, and, oh, they haven't got the last alligator in the box."

As ringmaster, Bauer is the "voice" of the Tarzan Zerbini International Circus. His job is to keep the show running at a smooth pace, hawk merchandise, act as straight man for Poppy the clown, and trumpet the virtues of the circus performers. Good thing he's been at this for a while.

In fact, his entire family has been in the circus business for a while: "Generations. It's been in the family for eight generations," Bauer said. He himself has been performing with the circus for 15 years — nearly half his life.

It's not an easy lifestyle, Bauer admitted. He himself left the circus for his own magic show in Atlantic City, but he's back now. "You've got to love it to come back and travel in the snow in a tent."

Maya Zerbini knows well the ups-and-downs of a love affair with the circus. The slight, blond Zerbini is a sixth-generation circus performer. Her husband and producer, Tarzan, is the fifth generation of his family to fall in love with the big top, and their daughter Delilah is a foot juggler in her parents' show.

"The good thing is you travel a lot ... and you're with your family all the time," Zerbini said. "People in town, they're apart for eight hours (a day)."

But there are tough times too — rainy days, for example, when her performing poodles have to be locked in their trailer so their curly hair doesn't get matted. The circus has had bad luck with rain this year, Zerbini said, looking up at the grey, drizzly sky before the afternoon show. "What's with the weather in your country?"

But she knows what it takes to survive the weather, the travelling and even uncooperative dogs and alligators.

"Patience is #1," she said. But in the centre ring, it all comes together. "When you see the people clapping, you feel good."

**"The good thing is you travel a lot ... and you're with your family all the time."**

**— Maya Zerbini**