

Tourists were ushered away as quickly as possible, to try and stop them from seeing Tilikum violently dragging Brancheau through the water, slamming her into the bottom of the pool and ripping her clothes off. The trainers slapped the surface of the water, which means to 'leave her'. How absolutely ridiculous that sounds.

"How is it even halfway feasible that anyone could possibly believe any safety protocol would be able to stop anything a killer whale wanted to do?"

Brancheau tried to get away from Tilikum twice but she would only have been successful if Tilikum allowed her to be. Of course no trainers jumped in to try and save her. Why would they? They all knew it would be suicide. How is anyone going to be able to take on a 12,000 pound killer whale? Maybe try slapping the water again.

Tilikum eventually let them herd him into a small medical pool where he could be lifted out of the water. As they brought him up he held on to Brancheau's arm. As they tried to free her he kept part of her arm. He had also scalped her and probably broken most of the bones in her body. The paramedics went to work, but it was useless. She was dead.

"Every safety protocol that we have failed," SeaWorld is director of animal training, Kelly Flaherty Clark, told me (Zimmermann) a month after the incident, her voice still tight with emotion. 'That's why we don't have our friend anymore, and that's why we are taking a step back'."

How is it even halfway feasible that anyone could possibly believe any safety protocol would be able to stop anything a killer whale wanted to do? The answer is, and has been from the beginning, it is not even remotely feasible. Up until that point, SeaWorld had not lost a trainer, but they had come close many, many times.

So why did Dawn Brancheau die?

In my opinion, first and foremost, she did not die. She was intentionally killed. It is wonderful and sweet that Brancheau gave her chocolate labs birthday parties. However, chocolate labs are about as close to orcas as chocolate candy. Brancheau certainly had the requirements of experience, athleticism and a whole lot of flair, but intuition? That she did not possess. Ego is what replaced intuition if she ever possessed it at all. Common sense might have saved her as well.

Keltie Bryne and Daniel Dukes were truly victims. But Dawn Brancheau was not.

I do not for one minute blame Tilikum for what he did to Brancheau. I blame Brancheau for what she did to Tilikum, day after day after day.

The best thing she could have done for Tilikum, and the rest of the whales who were in captivity, was to speak up for the fact that none of them belonged in tanks and none of them should have been performing tricks for a handful of fish. But that was what made Brancheau a star and she would not give that up. Her love for orcas was because they made her famous, though she probably didn't think in these terms, regarding her life, consciously. Ego always trumps conscience.

How many times were trainers brutally injured and nearly died? If Brancheau was the star of the show, she was the one who should have protected those she worked with from more injury. She should have spoken up about the injuries that occurred. However, had she done that she would have to admit to herself that no-one, not even her, was safe being in a pool with these animals. Nor should they be.

Dawn Brancheau was not the miracle that could transform Tilikum, a wild male orca, who had his whole life taken away from him. There is no miracle. There is only the truth. After three deaths, hundreds of near deaths, and the suffering of these magnificent animals I would like to believe they, the corporate heads and head trainers, trainers in general and whale psychiatrists, psychologists and behavioral biologists, are finally getting it. But the truth is, they were all already acutely aware of why Tilikum did what he did, just as they were aware of what the motivation is behind all aggression the whales demonstrated, but they all turned a blind eye to it.

Why? Money and hubris, which are the same reasons Brancheau was killed. Dawn might have loved Tilikum, but she loved herself more. So much so that she ignored the history.

After killing Dawn Brancheau, Tilikum was 'punished', kept in a tiny enclosure. It limited his ability to swim, communicate with other orcas, and interact with humans even further. According to one source: "He was reported to have been floating listlessly in the water for hours at a time, a behaviour never seen in wild orcas." Aerial shots of SeaWorld appear to show Tilikum's nose and tail touching both sides of the tank at the same time. He was eventually returned to performing, but even after her death Brancheau continued to torture Tilikum as he lingered in a holding tank for a year in isolation as punishment for killing her.

Journalist and Blackfish co-director and writer Tim Zimmermann summed up the scale of this injustice and tragedy in his article *Killer in the Pool* in *Outside* magazine. He wrote: "[Wild killer whales] swim with purpose and coordination, huffing spumes of mist into the salty, spruce-scented air. [One] group is known as L Pod, and one, a big male designated L78, was born just a few years after Tilikum.

"L78's dorsal fin stands proud and straight as a knife, with none of Tilikum's marine-park flop. He hunts when he's hungry, mates with the females who offer themselves, and whistles to the extended family that is always nearby. He cares nothing for humans and is all but oblivious to their presence when they paddle out in kayaks to marvel as he swims. He knows nothing of the life of Tilikum or the artificial world humans have manufactured for him. But Tilikum, before 26 [now 33] years in marine parks, once knew L78's life, once knew what it was like to swim the ocean alongside his mother and family."

And perhaps, just perhaps, that also helps explain why Dawn Brancheau died.

With the greatest respect to Tim Zimmermann, what happened does not 'perhaps' explain why Brancheau died. It explains, precisely, why Brancheau was intentionally killed by a tortured, intelligent, wild animal who had his life stolen from him and he had every right to do it.

Tilikum's life is one of the saddest stories I've ever known and now we learn he is dying. I will use the word 'perhaps' now. Perhaps in death he will find peace. Perhaps we all will.

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