

## Ohio exotic animal exhibitor "unfit to be licensed" by USDA

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Plain Dealer Reporters

When his beloved dog Brandy died a couple years ago, Sam Mazzola cried for days. A week before, he had lost his other buddy, a 24-year-old bear.

Friends and supporters say Mazzola treats his animals like family. He has even set aside two acres on his property for an animal cemetery. That's also where he will be buried, next to the animals he loves.

But critics, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, contend the 44-year-old exhibitor of exotic animals should not be in business.

This week, his wild animal exhibit was pulled from the Cleveland Sport, Travel & Outdoor Show, an annual event at the International Exposition Center that usually nets Mazzola about \$20,000.

I-X officials canceled the exhibit because he did not have an exhibitor's license from the Agriculture Department. The license was not renewed in November because he had provided false information.

He is unfit to be licensed, according to the USDA.

Mazzola is to appear in May at a USDA hearing to fight allegations of unsafe conditions for the animals and the public. He could receive a warning, fines or be barred from ever getting a license again.

On Friday, an animal-rights group asked Gov. Ted Strickland to push for statewide legislation making Ohio the 21st state to ban bear wrestling.

Mazzola said such a law is not needed, as 22,000 people have wrestled his bears without any major injury.

"I have fought for my right to do what I do for 20 years," he said Friday, standing in his barn surrounded by caged animals. "I will not stop now. I'm going to continue to fight."

Mazzola, a Parma native, grew up with dogs, hamsters, birds and ducks. He hunted and fished with his dad, and watched his mother care for her dogs.

"Whatever love I got for animals I think I really got from my

mother," he said.

He moved to Columbia Station as a young man. He shares 17 acres with eight bears, and assorted tigers and other exotics, who are caged inside and around the barn.

He started a bear-wrestling business about 25 years ago, appearing in college-town bars, nightclubs and county fairs around the region.

He named his black bear Caesar and offered \$1,000 to anyone who could pin the 700-pound animal. Over the years, nine people have won the prize, he said.

In 1990, Mazzola went to prison for cocaine and steroid trafficking, court records show. When he got out 18 months later, he returned to the circuit, adding more animals to his menagerie.

Mazzola was spared a second prison sentence in 1997, when he was convicted of illegally possessing a gun, court records show. The judge that time ordered him to seek counseling to control his temper.

The therapy helped, Mazzola said, but he still has a temper.

"I wrestle bears and tigers for a living," he said. "I'm not going to be afraid of a human."

Animal protective officials have been on the receiving end of his wrath, according to court records and interviews.

Jed Mignano, chief humane investigator with the Cleveland Animal Protective League, said in an interview that he investigated an accusation that one of Mazzola's employees had hit a tiger with a bat at last year's sport and travel show.

"[Mazzola] was very, very agitated and made threatening innuendoes to me," said Mignano, who reported the incident to the USDA.

A couple of years ago, Mazzola opened a pet store, Animal Zone, in Elyria's Midway Mall, followed by a second one in Great Northern Mall.

Michelle Matejcik of Lorain tried to return a hamster to the Elyria store.

She did not have a receipt and Mazzola refused, according to court records.

She contacted the Better Business Bureau. Mazzola countered by

writing a letter to the bureau, accusing Matejcik of being a disgruntled customer. The letter also made allegations involving drugs, beer and parties with minors.

Gino Pulito, Matejcik's attorney, said the letter is false. Matejcik sued for defamation. The case is pending in Lorain County Common Pleas Court.

The Great Northern Mall store closed in December, a few months after Mignano said he removed sick kittens and a puppy.

Mazzola said he has been arrested hundreds of times, but never convicted for animal cruelty.

On Thursday, Mazzola sued the Cleveland APL and Mignano, saying the investigator made false accusations about him abusing, neglecting and hitting tigers with a baseball bat.

The lawsuit also states that Mignano's accusations led to Great Northern Mall officials declining to renew his business lease in December.

Some of Mazzola's friends would hate to see him put out of business.

Jim Burnette, who operates Burnette's Farm and Educational Center in Olmsted Falls, said Mazzola cried for three days after Brandy the dog died. He cares about the big animals, too, Burnette said.

"His operation is clean. I know, because I've been there," Burnette said.

Steve Pistone, a Columbia Township business owner, said Mazzola operates a legitimate and educational business.

"You get to see wild animals up close," he said. "He loves the animals."

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