LIONS are often called the King of the Jungle. But is it true? Or have they been wrongly crowned and a grave injustice been done to the other illustrious and biggest member of the cat family – the Tiger?

Ever wondered, if a lion is pitted against a tiger who will win this big cat fight? This million dollar question excites as well as puzzles the mind of the young and old alike.

What will happen when these two fierce big cats have a showdown? Will it be a close contest? Or will this battle be a one sided affair and end in a few minutes? Or will it continue for eternity without a result?

Let’s take into account the physical aspects, particularly the behaviour of these majestic beasts and records of fights that have taken place between a lion and a tiger from time to time to come to a plausible and acceptable conclusion.

**Physical Aspects**

Like humans, lions and tigers have a distinct character, temperament and trait.

The average length of a male tiger is 3.3 metres and according to some records its length is up to 3.75 metres long including the length of its tail. On the other hand, the length of a lion is between 2.3 to 2.7 meters and some records peg this length to 3 metres including the length of its tail.

The tiger weighs more than 300 kg and the lion weighs around 250 kg which indicates that the tiger is more muscular and well built than the lions.

The width of the front paw of a tiger reaches 10.5 cm to 11.5 cm. The length of its sharp claws is between 9 and 10 cm. Although its claws measure 8 cm they are comparatively not as sharp as those of the tigers. The hind legs of the tigers are very strong and help it to make great leaps whereas the hind legs of the lions are not as strong as those of the tiger’s. Lions hardly ever leap.

**Behaviour in Wild and Captivity**

Lions are social animals and live and hunt in groups called prides. The tiger is a solitary animal and hunts alone. According to Craig Saffoe, a biologist and curator of great cats at the Smithsonian Zoo in Washington D.C., the tigers are more aggressive and have a killer instinct. They usually go for the throat, go for the kill.

Lions in a pride can bank on one another but the loner tiger has no backup. This is because they are conditioned through evolution never to depend on help from any quarters and always to go for the quick kill. It is this ruthlessness that gives tigers the edge.

The Alipore (Calcutta) Zoological Gardens’ first superintendent Ram Brahma Sanyal’s observation was that the tigers that were brought up in captivity were generally milder in disposition and were sometimes tame enough to allow the keepers and others to handle them, but their temper can never be trusted. It is a marked peculiarity of tigers that even the tamest become savage at feeding time.
Tigers often fight each other, seriously injuring one another. “Being determined to fight, they would manage it either by standing on their hind legs or sometimes jumping up against the gratings and clawing each other through the upper bars…” (Management of Animals in Captivity in Lower Bengal, 1892)

Thus, whether in the wild or in captivity the tigers are more aggressive than the lions.

**Earlier Results of Lion and Tiger Fights**

The earliest records of fights between lions and tigers dates back to the Roman times. In the reign of Emperor Titus, Royal Bengal Tigers and African Lions were imported. In a single arena, not only one-to-one lion and tiger fights were staged but there were also group fights where five lions were pitted against four tigers and the tigers were usually victorious in such combats.

Once, in Italy, there was a lion called “Cero II” who had made a name for himself by killing many beasts in staged combats. However this lion was said to have been killed by a tiger. Robert Edmond Sherwood in his work *Recollections of an Old Circus Clown* (1926) writes, “The tiger is a fighter. Place one full grown tiger and three lions in the same cage and the tiger will come forth badly disfigured but alive…” Obviously, he made this statement based on his own experience of seeing lions and tigers from close quarters in circuses.

Renowned naturalist Charles Darwin in his *The Descent of Man And Selection In Relation To Sex* tells about a battle between a tiger and a lion. In 1857, a tiger at Bromwick broke into the cage of a lion and charged at him. Though the lion’s mane saved his head and neck from injury the tiger succeeded in ripping up his belly, and in a couple of minutes the lion was dead.

In *Wild Animals Photographed and Described* (1866), John Fortune Nott says that “…the tiger with an audacity superior to his nature, even braves the lion himself. This is undoubtedly correct, for although there are but few if any instances recorded where the lion has voluntarily attacked or killed a tiger, there are several well known cases of tigers having attacked and killed lions.”

The female of the *Panthera tigris* has also killed the male of the *Panthera leo* and there are at least two recorded instances of this. Francis Buckland in his work *Curiosities of Natural History* (1882) describes such a battle where a tigress in a menagerie in Birmingham seized a lion by its throat and killed it within a few minutes.

According to *Northern Advocate* of 28 January 1921, “Nearly thirty years ago a fight occurred at Regent’s Park between a tigress and a lion brought up together. They had lived in the same cage for two years with only an occasional friendly indifference. Then one Sunday the tigress suddenly seized the lion by the throat and held him down and strangled him.”
In 1906, a short but fatal battle took place between a lion and a tiger in Edmonds Menagerie. Robert Armitage Sterndale talks about this incident in *Natural History of the Mammalia of India and Ceylon* (1929): “I believe there was once a case of a fair fight between a well matched lion and tiger in a menagerie (Edmond’s, I think). The two, by the breaking of a partition, got together, and could not be separated. The duel resulted in the victory of the tiger, which killed his opponent.”

In June 1902, at the Perth Zoological Gardens, Australia, a fight broke out in a Zoo between a tiger called “Tom” and a Lioness called “Nancy”. The then director of the Zoo described the event as a single-handed fight and though the lioness Nancy was very powerful and active she got no chance of holding her own. She had the worse of every bout with Tom and at the end the tiger carried her round the cage, displaying a degree of strength that was simply marvellous. With the greatest difficulty the tiger was removed and locked in another den, and the lioness died not long afterwards.

In May 1914, the Bronx Park Zoo, USA, witnessed a battle between an African lion named “Huerta” and a Royal Bengal tiger named “Rajah”. It happened that the lion accidentally entered the den of the tiger when it found it unbarred and both of them got into a deadly fight in front of hundreds of horrified visitors. Keepers of the zoo armed with pikes and clubs made fruitless efforts to part the two infuriated beasts. They fought nearly an hour, when the tiger succeeded in closing his jaws over the nape of the lion’s neck, breaking his back and killing him instantly.

Gerald L. Wood in his book *Animals Facts and Feats: A Guinness Record of the Animal Kingdom* (1972) writes, “…Proske (1957) describes a fight to the death between a circus lion and a tiger, which the latter won after crushing the lion’s neck.”

**Lion and Tiger Fights in India**

In the late 1800s, the then Gaekwad of erstwhile Baroda state believed that lions were stronger than tigers and arranged a fight between them. Before the fight began, those running the bet set the odds at Rs. 1 to Rs. 37000 that the tiger would win. It did and the Gaekwad not only lost thirty seven thousand rupees but his belief in the strength of the lion.

A deadly fight between a lioness and a tiger broke out at the Calcutta Zoological Gardens in 1891. R.B. Sanyal who was the superintendent of the Zoo at that time describes this incident as follows:

“On the arrival of a pair of adult lions at the garden they were placed together; as they began to fight it was considered dangerous to leave them in the same den. They were, therefore, temporarily kept apart, the lioness being accommodated in the front portion of the next lateral compartment of the building, in the back portion of which a tiger was securely confined; the latter showed no tendency to be excited. All being satisfactorily arranged the jemadar was allowed to absent himself for a short time, leaving two garden keepers in charge with strict injunctions that no change should be made in his absence. Shortly afterwards a great noise was heard in the direction of the carnivore house, and it was found that the grating door between the two compartments in which the lioness and the tiger had been separated was raised, so that they had come together. The lioness was seen to be dying from the injuries inflicted by the tiger…”

Gerald L. Wood tells about another incident of a tiger and lion duel in another Indian zoo. On 19 November 1945, visitors to the Zoological gardens at Bangalore, witnessed a fight between a tiger and a lioness which ended in the death of the lioness.

Earlier, lions were the national animal of the country but now the tiger has replaced the lions to become our national animal. In historical times, lions occupied a wide territory in our country but many believe that the tigers which came from outside slowly exterminated the lion population.
Naturalist Col. Kesri Singh was one of the firm believers of this notion. In his work *One Man and Thousand Tigers* (1959) he writes, “I do not myself think that the gradual disappearance of the Indian lion has been mainly due to human intervention. I believe the tiger to be responsible. Lions and tigers in the same area are direct competitors for exactly the same prey, and tigers are semi-solitary by habit, jealous of their hunting ranges and notoriously intolerant of any sort of rivalry.”

In the 1950s, Col. Singh also arranged three public fights between lions and tigers in a specially prepared arena. In all these fights the tigers emerged victorious.

The then Maharaja of erstwhile Gwalior state decided to reintroduce lions in his territory. He got three pairs of African lions imported for this purpose. They were kept in a especially built high enclosure in the Sheopur-Shivpuri forest range. According to Singh, “The surrounding forest abounded in tigers who seemed to be attracted by the roaring of the lions on the other side of the high wall. Twice while making one of my periodical inspections of the place I found a tiger prowling nearby – probably anxious to challenge the unfamiliar voices.”

A pair of lions was released on an experimental basis but the lion was soon found to be mauled to death by a tiger.

**Recent Big Cat Fight**

Recently, in the year 2011 a tiger at Ankara Zoo of Turkey killed a lion with a single strike of its paw. The tiger accidently entered the lion’s enclosure though a gap and soon a terrible fight broke out between the two. The tiger severed the lion’s jugular vein in just a single strike of its huge paw.

“Speaking of the tiger, he is easily the king of the feline family, says a Calcutta hunter. He can whip a lion hands down, as has been shown in every case reported where the two have come together on fair terms. The tiger is as strong and heavy as the lion, is swifter, more ferocious, and more dangerous.” Thus begins an article titled *Traits of The Indian Tiger* which was published in the *Auckland Star* of 12 August 1899.

Dr. Houghton who was once the secretary of the Dublin Zoo in the 1870s also from his personal experience with lions and tigers judged the tigers to be stronger. When the ingrown nails of these big cats was clipped five people were needed to pin the lion whereas to pin down the tiger eight people were required which speaks volumes about the muscular strength of the tiger.

Bert Nelson, a renowned big cat trainer of his time, had once famously said that the wrong cat is called the king of the beasts. When comparing lions and tigers, Col. Singh sums up that the tigers as a general rule are more powerful, more cunning, and better equipped for life in the jungle.

So, if we take the physical aspects, characteristics and behaviour as well as documented records of lion and tiger fights we can safely say that the tiger is the real king of the beasts. This may as well answer the million dollar question: Who will win the fight if they ever cross each other’s path.

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