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Contact: Charmaine Fortune
Videosport Television
TEL: +27 (0)11 462-6243
MOBILE: +27 (0) 829910011

How Do You Stop the Fastest Cats on the Planet?

(It's simple. Put them in a cage together.)

Whether it's the four-legged kind - - the cheetah - - or the two-legged variety - - stock car drivers - - we are all fascinated by merchants of speed. Usually, we are awed as we watch them in action. On February 1, the fastest men and women on earth will gather at the Savannah Lodge and Cheetah Preserve in Parys, South Africa to meet the fastest land animal. This time, however, the two will come to a halt and experience one another at a standstill.

Twenty-five top international drivers will visit The Savannah, one of the world's top cheetah preserves, to experience the remarkable animals up close. Bobby Hartslief, builder of the Phakisa Freeway circuit and Executive Director of the Savannah Cheetah Foundation, is responsible for the intersection of the two different worlds. "We will put these fast cats in a cage together and let them both slow down to admire one another," said Hartslief. "I'll wager that the drivers will be the most indelibly impressed of the two."

Located just 192 km from Phakisa, the site of the first-ever American style stock car race on African soil, held a day earlier, The Savannah will play host to 25 top international drivers and their teams. Among the drivers, Nelson Piquet, Jr., Geoff Bodine, Ron Barfield Jr., Tiffany Daniels, Chris Wimmer and Marc Davis will sit with the cheetahs of The Savannah and learn about their incredible engineering and much more. "I am amazed by the physiology that makes their speed possible," said Ron Barfield Jr. "I am impressed by what the Savannah Cheetah Foundation is doing to breed cheetah, and to realize their ultimate goal of successfully releasing them into the wild. I'm glad to be a part of ASA's efforts to support this valuable program," said Nelson Piquet, Jr. "I visited the Savannah last month when I was here for a pre-race press event. I was amazed at all the animals I saw, especially the cheetah. When one of the cats laid his head on my lap and started purring, it sounded just like an idling big block Chevy," said Geoff Bodine.

Bringing these Fast Cats together is an effort to highlight the crucial moment in the plight of the cheetah. "Unless we act fast, the cheetah will be extinct," said Jim Fouts, President of the American Zoo Association and Savannah Cheetah Foundation board member. "The relationship between the cheetah and their environment is the key to success."

"The cheetahs are the canary in the coal mine in African conservation," remarked Bobby Hartsliel. "If the water is contaminated, the cheetah will die. If the animals they eat have eaten fertilizer, they will die. It is only by the conservation of the land and the water, that the cheetah will have a chance."

Over the past seven years, the Savannah Cheetah Foundation (501c3 US and Section 21 SA) has bred 29 cheetahs and dispatched them to zoos around the world, including Tokyo, Seattle and Miami. The impact, however, of these efforts on the worldwide cheetah population was negligible. Therefore, in 2007 with the assistance of Dr. Larry Kilmer, then from San Diego Zoo, the SCF initiated a project to develop protocol for taking captive bred cheetah and teach them how to fend for themselves in the wild-with the objective of placing captive bred cheetah back into their natural habitat.

"With the purchase of an additional 810 hectares adjacent to our existing property, we are now poised to begin anew and release our captive bred cheetah into a controlled environment for observation and evaluation before releasing them into huge game preserves in the Free State Provincial parks," Hartsliel added. "This, we believe, will repopulate cheetah in a significant way."

In support, the American Speed Association will initiate a fundraising effort for the Savannah Cheetah Foundation at all ASA Member Tracks. Special limited edition Fast Cats decals will be awarded to every Feature Division winner. In addition, the ASA Member Tracks that contribute the most to the Savannah Cheetah Foundation will be entered into a drawing for a trip to the Savannah Wildlife Preserve during the 2011 ASA Transcontinental Free State 500. "We are proud to be involved in supporting the Savannah Cheetah Foundation," says Dennis Huth, president of the American Speed Association. "My visits to South Africa have impressed upon me the necessity and urgency of protecting the cheetah, the fastest cat of them all."

In addition, the South African winery, Ernst Gouws and Company (www.ernstgouws.co.za), will donate \$1 from every case of wine sold in the United States to the Savannah Cheetah Foundation. "Conservation of our land is among the most critical issues we face in South Africa. By protecting the cheetah, we preserve our land," remarked vintner Ernst Gouws.

The ASA Transcontinental Series Free State 500 will be contested on the 2,5-km banked oval Phakisa Freeway circuit in Welkom, Free State, South Africa on Sunday, January 31, 2010. The 207-lap 500-km event will feature a diverse group of drivers from the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Brazil and

South Africa competing in full size body stock cars. This will be the first time that American style stock cars will be competing on the oval and it will also be the first race event ever on the oval itself that was built in 1998.

To learn more of the Daytona Beach, Fla.-based American Speed Association call (386) 258-2221 or send an e-mail to info@asa-racing.com. For news and information from all the racetracks and regional tours involved in the ASA, visit www.ASA-Racing.com.

For more information about the Savannah and the Savannah Cheetah Foundation, visit www.scf africa.org.