

Harnessing the Howls: Handlers Nurture the Nature of their Throaty Coonhounds

by Karin Winegar

&

Coon Hunt

by Leroy Powell

A Generation Homeschool Mini-Lesson to accompany

“Where the Red Fern Grows” by Wilson Rawls





THE DAILY NEWS



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coonhounds.**

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It was not a pretty view from the treed raccoon's perspective: mauve tongues lolling, drool flying and long ears flapping, three blue tick coonhounds leaped and scrambled and embraced the oak tree with their front paws all the while giving out hearty, nonstop howls – "rooh ahroo roh."



Fortunately for the young raccoon hissing and growling in a wire mesh cage hung in a tree, it was just practice and she would soon be set free.

The hounds - Slick, age 6, Victory, 11, and 2-year old Windsor - are owned by Marilyn Le Blanc and Leon Swing of Bradford, Minn., and they were doing what comes naturally, barking up a tree.

Le Blanc is assistant manager for Federal Shooting Sports Center. Swing works as a field engineer for Anoka Electric Cooperative. Their pastime for several decades has been coonhounds, and they will give working coonhound demonstrations at the upcoming Game Fair at Armstrong Ranch Kennels in Anoka.

Competitive coon hunting is a night sport, they explained, where a cast (four handlers) and four hounds set out into the dark for two or three hours to test noses, voices and ears. The humans listen intently to the dogs, who vocally telegraph their moves on the trail.

Coonhound handlers enter the woods wearing miners' lamps, gloves and chaps.

"We get into prickly ash and barbed wire; it saves on pants," said Le Blanc, who also wore a white plastic coon squaller on a lanyard around her neck.

"Here's a distress call," she said, blowing something raw and high that sounded like a screaming baby with a sore throat. "That gets a coon to move in the tree so you can see them."

Competitors must actually see the raccoon, not just rely on their dog's indication that it's in the tree.

"We might not see a coon at all on some nights; other nights we see five or six," Swing said. "That's why they are bred to bark on tracks. That ensures that hunters know where the dogs are, but it also lets game know, too. From the voice we can tell if it's a cold track, if they are looking at the coon or if they can't find it.

"To me, a good coonhound hunts with you, doesn't just hunt for you. You need a team out there."

Raccoons are treed but not killed in competitive coon hunting, Swing and Le Blanc said.

"I don't enjoy the kill. The only coons we shoot are nuisance coons - when a farmer calls us because they are destroying his crop," Le Blanc said.

Six breeds of coonhounds are used in competition: English, Plott hound, walker, redbone, black and tan and blue tick.

Hounds wear radio collars, but part of the game is for handlers to locate and read them by their voices.

"Generally, they bawl on a track - `oooohh' - and short chop - `oh, oh, owh' - on a tree," Le Blanc said. Handlers must "call" or identify their dog's voice and activity; for example, "tree, Victory." The first to do so gets 100 points, the next gets 75, then 50 and 25.

Swing and Le Blanc's hounds are Victory, who is bowlegged and hunch-shouldered, with intense yellow eyes that follow conversation; the thick-waisted Slick, who is affable; and Windsor, yippy, slim and eager. They also own Frosty, a retired 14-year-old swim dog and show champion.

A swim dog is a coonhound that follows a raccoon well through water. At the Game Fair, Swing and Le Blanc will set their hounds on a trail that crosses a lake by using a caged raccoon riding in a Styrofoam float.

"When we met in 1979, he [Swing] took me on my first hunt," Le Blanc said. "We went out in the woods, and he cut the dogs loose. They started barking, and he said they'd treed a raccoon. And I said, 'How can you tell?' Then we leashed up the dogs and I said, 'Is this it?' I didn't understand it until I got my own dog, then I found out what his dogs did is pretty special, and how much it took to do that."

Said Swing: "She got her own dog in 1981, and it's been hard to keep her out of the woods. Marilyn and I operate like a team; we hunt together, fish together, train dogs, the whole shot."

The pair have hunted raccoon competitively from Michigan to North Carolina and from the Dakotas to Texas.

"I'm only uncomfortable in Texas," Swing said. "They've got snakes and alligators, I mean big ones! I'll watch, but I'm not goin' in the swamps."

The United Kennel Club (UKC) offers competition in field, swim, night hunting and bench (conformation) divisions. Swing is former president of the Minnesota Coonhound Association and a licensed UKC master of hounds and bench show judge. There are 12 coonhound clubs in Minnesota, with 50 to 100 hounds per club, he said, and events every weekend.

They hope to dispel the stereotype of coon hunters as "Southern moonshiners," pointing out that plenty of professional people run coonhounds.

"I always wanted a coonhound when I was a kid, when I did a lot of hunting, and read 'Where the Red Fern Grows,' a real tear-jerker about coonhounds," Swing said. "In my 20s, I got a black and tan who hunted everything - coyote, fox, coon - and didn't work on anything. In the 1970s, I got into registered blue ticks, and I've been in them ever since."

Today, the couple work dogs on their 170 acres in Bradford and on neighboring land where they have permission to conduct night hunts.

Coonhound voices carry up to a half-mile or mile, depending on the dog and the wind.

"I like training and being outdoors with dogs," Le Blanc said. "They are like kids - some are aggressive, some passive, some smarter than others."

Coonhounds range in price from about \$250 for a puppy to \$2,000 for a well-trained hound.

Le Blanc and Swing say it's the people that keep them in the sport, as well as their own love of dogs.

"We take a lot of pride and pleasure in seeing them do well," she said. ■

Coon Hunt

An essay by LeRoy Powell

Hunting coons is a lot like eating chitterlings. If you do either of them once, you never have to do it again. It's like being vaccinated. One unpleasant dose will protect you. After one serving of chitterlings, for instance, you have an excuse that will keep you chitterling-free forever. From then on, if anybody asks you if you want some chitterlings, you can say, "No thank you, I had some already." I had my chitterlings ten years ago. I don't want any more. Coon hunting is like that, too.

The raccoon is a very intelligent animal. I wish I could say the same for coon hunters. Some people around here get great pleasure out of coon hunts and go every chance they get. I figured it must hold some attraction that you can't see from a distance, so one January evening, I hooked up with a bunch of boys in Newton County, Georgia for a night of adventure.

The way you go coon hunting is you get together with a crowd of other coon-seekers and their coon dogs and head for the woods in the middle of the night. When you get to the woods, you turn the dogs loose. Then you wait – a cluster of full-grown men wearing hip boots and hard hats with little headlights stuck on them – and listen to the dog's bark. I don't have to go to the middle of the woods to hear dogs bark. I have a dog at my house.

But coon hunters love this. They know each dog's voice. Each hunter knows what his dog is saying to him. They do not speak Dog, but they understand it fluently.

You are standing around in the woods, a pack of dogs is running around howling in the dark, and the coon hunters are having a grand old time. You, the initiate, are just freezing to death. Weather is very important in coon hunting. It has to be cold enough to be really uncomfortable or the hunters are not happy. Somewhere out in the darkness is a coon, and he is likely, when pursued by a pack of dogs, to climb a tree. The dogs report to their owners on the progress of the chase.

Questions below relate to the article, “Harnessing the Howls” by Karin Winegar, and “Coon Hunt” by LeRoy Powell, and are to be used in conjunction with “Where the Red Fern Grows” by Wilson Rawls.

Each of these works offer different views on raccoon hunting. The first shows the competitive nature of coon hunting, and the second finds humor in the sport. Use what you’ve learned from each of the articles, and the novel by Wilson Rawls to answer the following questions.

Write your answers on a sheet of paper using complete sentences. Turn them in when you are finished.

1. Think of an activity or hobby that you really enjoy. Have you ever met someone who makes fun of that hobby? If so, what do they say? How do you respond?
2. Describe the tone, or attitudes, for each of the authors toward the subject.
3. Who account of coon hunting did you find the most appealing? Explain your answer.
4. Does raccoon hunting sound like fun to you? Use examples from either article and from *Where the Red Fern Grows* to explain why or why not.
5. According to “Harnessing the Howls”, how far can a coonhound voice carry, or be heard?
6. What is the price range for coonhounds?
7. How do handlers earn points during a coon hunting tournament? Explain. Refer back to the text if you need to.
8. In “Coon Hunt”, Powell’s first line states, “Hunting coons is a lot like eating chitterlings.” First, what is a chitterling? Next, explain the meaning of the quote within the context of the story.
9. Based on the two readings and on “Where the Red Fern Grows”, describe a typical raccoon hunt.
10. With whom would you prefer to go coon hunting: Billy, Marilyn LeBlanc and Leon Swing, or LeRoy Powell? Explain using evidence from any of the three texts.