

Heartland Classic moving to Wisconsin. The AKC Heartland Classic will celebrate its seventh year in 2012. After a great run consisting of two years in Tomah, Wisconsin and four years in Nashua, Iowa the AKC Heartland Classic will be moving to Mineral Point, Wisconsin in 2012. We deeply appreciate the efforts of Marc Brogan and Erika Froeming of the Heartland Houndsmen Federation and of Brad Messersmith, Bob Burgart and Rod Hanawalt of the Nashua, Iowa club to not only host the AKC Heartland Classic but also to work tirelessly selling tickets to provide the great four-wheelers as raffle prizes and as the top prize in the night hunt.

The Heartland Houndsmen Federation has from the beginning been the core of the Heartland Classic effort. From the very start the goal was to provide a family-oriented weekend of coonhound events including great bench shows and activities for the kids in addition to the nite hunts. To that end I'm very happy to announce that Erika Froeming of Edgerton, WI will chair the Heartland Federation board of directors going forward. Erika's proven leadership and dedication to the goals of the Heartland Classic make her the easy choice for the chairperson's position. Erika gets her leadership qualities honestly. I worked with her father, the late Eric Froeming in hosting a very successful World Championship Zone event in Elkhorn, WI years ago.

Erika has announced the following board members that share her passion for the event and will carry the goals of the Heartland Federation forward: Grant Noeske (Illinois), John Dunlavy (Wisconsin), Bob Burgart (Iowa), and Phil Kruegel (Minnesota). Of the new board and renewed focus Erika has this to say: **"We are very excited about the event coming back to Wisconsin, and the changes in venue and leadership have brought forth some new faces that will no doubt contribute some fresh ideas and energy to the event."** Erika also added, "We also have so many people interested in being involved and bringing good ideas, that we are welcoming all to be in the Federation. Among those are Marc Brogan, Jimmy Paulson, Ben Downing, Lisa Brooks, Mark Hauck, Ben Mick, and many more."

The 2012 AKC Heartland Classic will be held at the fairgrounds in Mineral Point, WI on June 28-30. The event will be hosted by the Blackhawk Area Coon Hunters Club of Highland, WI, with the help of area clubs. The Blackhawk and Arthur clubs in Wisconsin and the Elizabeth, IL club each have some excellent hunting, wonderful guides, quality judges and in all, some really fun people. We'll be announcing many of the changes and innovations that Erika and the Heartland Federation board will be bringing to the 2012 event in the months to come. Mark your calendars. It's going to be huge!

Faith in youth affirmed. I chose this subtitle thoughtfully, carefully using the term affirmed instead of restored when talking about the events of last weekend at the AKC Youth World Championship held at the High Oaks Coon Club in Newport, TN. I've always had a lot of faith in our youth. I know there are far more good kids across the fruited plain than those we hear about on the news networks. There are lots of kids out there that are from good families, families that sacrifice to see that they get a good education and wholesome activities to nurture them until they become productive members of this American society. I met some of those kids and their families last weekend in Newport.

Mike Bryant, J.R. Jenkins and all the guys at High Oaks Coon Club always inspire me with the dedication they put into their club's events and it all centers around kids. The club raises phenomenal amounts of cash each year for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis. An example is the fish fry held on Saturday at the AKC Youth World Championship bringing the community into the effort and an even greater example is their AKC State Championship benefit held each September. All of the effort and funds raised go to St. Jude where cures are continually found for life-threatening childhood diseases.

Going hand in hand with the fund-raising, and perhaps at the core of the effort are the coonhound events. We are very proud that the High Oaks group has chosen the AKC coonhound events program as the centerpiece for their major fund-raising efforts. Kids benefit and we get to share in the emotionally rich rewards of their work as well.

It's easy to get into conversations around the events these days about the future of coon hunting. The term "dying sport" is heard more often than not and the general consensus is that if we don't bring hunters into the sport at a rate that is at least comparable to the outflow of hunters leaving the sport due either to age, economics or lack of hunting territory the sport is terminal. There's no denying the sport is in decline but so is it too with all of the hunting sports. Young hunters that enjoy the sport with their parents become parents themselves with kids that play school and summer sports and with demanding jobs that take their time away from hunting when the long days are through.

The AKC's effort to introduce and to keep kids involved in coon hunting is called Coonhound U. Kids that win casts and place their dogs in shows receive diplomas and are invited to the annual Coonhound U Championship held on Friday and Saturday nights at the AKC World Coonhound Championship. The idea is that the kids are actually learning the finer points of the sports and realizing the joy of the rewards by actually doing the sport, either in the woods or in the show rings. The Coonhound U Honors Graduation at the World Hunt is an opportunity to recognize the efforts the kids have shown and a chance for the parents to bust a few buttons as well. It's a great time and something every coonhound kid should have the opportunity to enjoy. The Coonhound U Championship and the Coonhound U Honors Graduation for wins earned in 2011 will be held in Crittenden, KY next May.

Two young men that exemplify the aims of the Coonhound U program are Brett Banks and Wesley Smelcher. Brett won the AKC Youth World Championship Night Hunt last year and Wesley made the Top 20, both hunting Blueticks. Both graduated out of the program last year and came back this year to enter the non-sanctioned 18 to 20-year old class. It was great to see them again, to relive the events of last year and to catch up with their lives since last year. Both the boys had grown physically and have also matured in their personal lives. Now they were back lending a helping hand to Mike Bryant and encouraging the younger hunters to excel in the program as they had and generally, as I said at the beginning of this piece, affirming my faith in this program and the youth that make it what it is.

If you are genuinely interested in preserving this sport, in snatching it from the brink of extinction as some predict, get involved through the youth. Plan to have an adult judge handy at your AKC events to take the youth cast out should two or more kids aged 17 or under want to hunt together. Also plan special youth hunts and shows to attract and keep young hunters and young show people to your club. Take the time to mentor these young people, passing on the years of knowledge you have attained through your involvement with the sport. You will get no greater reward in this sport than to leave it better than you found it through the youth that you help along the way.

Bubba Back Home. I got an email from my old buddy Bubba back home in the hills. He says it's been so wet that the frogs are wear'n life jackets. Anyway, Bubba said the preacher down at the Forks of the Creek Community Church had a life and death experience here lately. He says the preacher dreamed he died and was waitin' in line at the Pearly Gates. Ahead of him was a guy who's dressed in sunglasses, a loud shirt, leather jacket, and jeans.

The preacher said Saint Peter spoke to this cool guy, 'Who are you, so that I may know whether or not to admit you to the Kingdom of Heaven?'

The guy replies, 'I'm Jack, retired airline pilot from Houston.' Saint Peter consults his list. He smiles and says to the pilot, 'Take this silken robe and golden staff and enter the Kingdom.' The pilot goes into Heaven with his robe and staff.

Next, it's the preacher's turn. He stands erect and booms out, 'I am Preacher Bob, pastor of the Forks of the Creek Community Church for the last 43 years.'

Saint Peter consults his list. He says to Bubba's preacher, 'Take this cotton robe and wooden staff and enter the Kingdom.'

'Just a minute,' says the preacher. 'That man was a pilot and he gets a silken robe and golden staff and I get only cotton and wood. How can this be?'

'Up here we go by results,' says Saint Peter. 'When you preached, people slept. When he flew, people prayed.'