

Iroquois Begins 125th Season With One Eye On The Past And One On The Future

By Glenye Cain

The Chronicle of the Horse - Dec-21-2005

When the members and staff of Iroquois Hunt Club gathered for their blessing of the hounds on Nov. 6 at the historic Iroquois Grimes Mill Clubhouse I Lexington, Ky., they were celebrating the hunt's 125th year.

That remarkable span started when Gen. Roger D. Williams decided to name his pack after the winner of the 1880 English Derby: Iroquois, the first American horse to take the classic race. (The Iroquois Hunt is the only one to feature a horse on its buttons, in honor of its namesake.)

The Iroquois blessing is also a great Kentucky tradition. Tourists often find postcards depicting the picturesque ceremony, which took place this year, as always, on the small, oval-shaped lawn in front of the stone mill that is the hunt's clubhouse.

After joining almost 150 at brunch--featuring such local delights as three-cheese grits, country sausage, and apples and cranberries baked in bourbon and brown sugar--76 riders gathered outside for the blessing and presentation of St. Hubert's medals. As they stood alongside their horses, a group of French horn players seated on a limestone outcropping near the lawn added a romantic note.

The event drew local television and print media, plainly intrigued by the colorful ceremony combining horses, hounds, riders, and clergy.

What they couldn't know, of course, was how many of those riders had, just a couple of hours earlier, been desperately scrubbing stubborn manure stains off the horses they'd left clean the night before. And how many were wondering whether that new Myler bit really would be capable of stopping a half-draft at full throttle from hurtling directly into the rump of the fieldmaster's horse. Or whether that third cup of coffee might have been one too many.

Fortunately, the Right Rev. Robert W. Estill understood these thoughts perfectly well. Now the bishop of North Carolina, Estill is a former member of Iroquois who spent a significant portion of his early career wearing spurs as well as vestments--sometimes, it was said, at the same time. Estill spoke humorously and a bit wistfully of his familiarity with the hunt before making his blessing. A selection of the Iroquois hounds wandered curiously around his feet, patiently withstood the embraces of nearby children, and snuffled for bits of biscuit that might have dropped in the grass.

Looking Out For The Hounds

Standing on a millstone laid on its side, Estill called to mind the Masters and huntsmen who have contributed to the hunt's long and successful history in central Kentucky.

The current masters, Jerry L. Miller and Dr. Jack van Nagell, and amateur huntsman Lilla S. Mason, gently corralled the hounds as Estill spoke. And it's a fair assumption that their minds, like those of the hounds, were probably bent more toward that day's hunting than toward the past.

Iroquois has always tipped its top hat to its long tradition, but it has cut new paths too. Mason is the first female huntsman in the club's history, and she may be the most apparent symbol of change. But there are others, almost all related directly to the hounds.

Miller is the first master to have established a tax-deductible Hound Welfare Fund that supports Iroquois' retired hounds, requiring even that hounds drafted to other hunts be returned at the end of their

useful days to ensure them a happy dotage. And all Iroquois hounds wear tracking collars out hunting, an anathema to many historic-minded hunts that has, the Iroquois mastership will tell you, saved canine lives on the palisades and rocky creeks of central Kentucky.

The hunt's whole training program is an innovation. Miller's "no hound left behind" regimen has produced hounds that others--even Mason, from time to time--would probably have given up on as hunters.

"Sometimes maturing is all they need," Miller explained, "and we're committed to giving every hound a chance. We fit our training to them. If a hound has a problem, we don't assume they'll never get over it. We try everything we can to figure that hound out and solve that problem. We owe it to them."

"Sometimes it's hard work," Mason said. "Jerry will continue his program of training and retraining until every hound is successful, and it works."

Case in point: young Iroquois Finish, an unlikely hero on blessing day. As the field of 57 riders clattered up narrow Grimes Mill Rd. behind Mason, huntsman and hounds were confronting unseasonable 70-degree heat and the brittle conditions left by a drought that had started in late spring and extended into the autumn.

It didn't really seem a propitious day for locating a coyote, and probably a good number of the riders--being generous-minded and possibly also thinking ahead to the hunt ball--would have excused a leisurely stroll around the hunt country looking at fall foliage as a good day. And the day began with a good 11³²-mile hack from the mill to the day's first covert. But they also hunted, thanks in large part to Finish, a poster child for the Iroquois training program's benefits.

Patience Pays Off

Three years ago, no one would have believed that last sentence. Finish is a Crossbred, by Iroquois Catlow out of Iroquois Fiber. Fiber is a combination of the Cottesmore "ST" and "FI" lines that have been so successful in the Iroquois breeding program. With such a strong family history, Finish seemed a highly promising hound.

He won the unentered Crossbred division at the Virginia Hound Show in 2001 and came back the following year to win the entered Crossbred crown too. But in his first year of hunting, he was, as Mason put it, "hard to handle." And in the kennel he had a habit of climbing out and following hounds wherever they went, whether or not he was invited.

Three years later, Finish is a bona-fide star. On blessing day, he struck off on a coyote line that few hounds would have found in the scent-killing heat and dryness. Finish ran him into a field full of cattle, where the coyote line weaved in and out of the herd, but he deciphered the maneuvers with no trouble and pressed the coyote on with another Iroquois celebrity--the bitch Bonfire, who has won grand championships at both the Mid-America (Ky.) and Canadian (Ont.) hound shows--with the rest of the pack in close pursuit.

What followed was a pulse-racing run across some of the hunt's northernmost country, and those who were willing to risk a late arrival at the night's dancing were plenty glad they'd stayed out to ride it. The coyote ultimately lived to fight another day, but Finish had led the chase--proof Iroquois staff needed that their intensive training program is well worth the trouble.

"Here we are on Blessing Day three years later, and he's a star," Miller said of Finish.

The final run had ended 10 miles from the hunt club with dusk closing in on the stalwarts of the Iroquois field. And so Miller, the hounds, and the field turned for home, blessed indeed.