

LIFE after the Chase

Hound Welfare Fund cares for retirees

By Glenye Cain Oakford | Photos by Amy Wallot

It's an ideal place to spend one's golden years, surrounded by the rolling hills and open fields of the Iroquois Hunt country south of Lexington. At this particular retirement home, a pair of young foxes sometimes plays near the front gate, and, on certain winter mornings, the sound of the huntsman's horn carries over the limestone cliffs that border Boone Creek. Here, the pensioners still live among their friends and family, and when those companions head to work, the retirees entertain themselves with long walks in the woods and fields or naps in the sun.

That's the kind of comfortable retirement most people hope for, but this isn't a retirement village for humans. It's for retired foxhounds from the Bluegrass' historic Iroquois Hunt Club, and it's paid for by the Hound Welfare Fund. The 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization is the first of its kind, supporting foxhounds after their careers, when they're no longer

covered under the hunt's budget for active hounds. Founded in 2000 and based at Jerry and Susan Miller's Miller Trust Farm near Lexington, the HWF cares for about 20 to 25 pensioned Iroquois foxhounds at any given time, providing them with a peaceful and dignified "life after the chase," as the non-profit's motto puts it. The retired hounds remain

in the same kennel as the active pack, cared for by the people who've worked with them all their lives.

On a recent late-summer afternoon, two retired hounds lolled under a white ash tree in their grassy 15-acre enclosure. Several others wandered in and out of a thicket, noses skimming the ground, and another rolled lazily, scratching her back in the thick grass. For any still inclined to sniff out a little game, there were still plenty of options: The pen contains woods and a pond where rabbits and squirrels also roam. The hounds' personal chases are slower now but still fulfilling, said Lilla Mason, one of the Iroquois Hunt's Masters of Foxhounds

and also its huntsman, the person who carries the horn and directs the hounds during hunts. As she and kennel manager Michael Edwards watch the happy meanderings of the retired hounds, they're confident the HWF is spreading joy, both canine and human.

"I think it's helping set a standard for the world," said Mason, who co-founded the HWF and serves as its president. "We have a lot of visitors from England who subsequently go back and then let us know they've retired a few hounds at their homes. There are a lot of objections to retiring hounds and people who believe that you cannot retire a hunting dog because it will break its heart or that they will just run off, that you can never domesticate or house-train them. There are a lot of reasons people believe hounds can't live comfortably in retirement. But we've found it's not true."

For those who visit the hounds in their peaceful kingdom, it's hard to believe that the scene is, in fact, revolutionary, as Keeneland director and former chairman James E. Bassett III points out. Bassett was the honorary chairman for the HWF's fundraising dinner and



Above, a retiree enjoys a drink on a warm day at the kennel. Left, the Iroquois Hunt's Lilla Mason helped establish the foundation. Below, kennel manager Michael Edwards cares for the retirees and the working pack.

auction this year at the Iroquois Hunt's headquarters, the 210-year-old Grimes Mill. He compares the HWF to similar charities in Thoroughbred racing.

"What I find most appealing about this challenge is that, in the foxhunting world, this humanitarian Hound Welfare Fund is decidedly unique," Bassett said. "For the Iroquois Hunt stands virtually alone in providing life after the chase ... So the Iroquois, the third-oldest hunt in America, merits a well-deserved badge of honor for its noble humanitarian efforts in providing a safe sanctuary for retired hounds, and hopefully this may serve as a meaningful challenge for other hunts to achieve."

That's the plan, say HWF supporters. "We've influenced other hunt clubs to consider the possibility of a retirement program, and some of them have begun their own because of our experience that it can be done and all the positive aspects of it," Mason explained. "We're happy to provide information to people who are interested in starting their own program."

Members of the family

It was Miller Trust owner Jerry L. Miller — one of the Iroquois Hunt's Masters of Foxhounds and the person in charge of the club's hound program — who inspired Mason and several others (including this writer) to establish an independent nonprofit foundation to care for the retired hounds.

Miller, the former president of Bluegrass AAA in Lexington, grew up hunting with Walker hounds in rural Ohio and became a Master of Fox Hounds at Iroquois in 1993.

For Miller, retiring hounds was never a question.

"When I was entrusted with the Iroquois hounds and the hound program, it never crossed my mind not to do it," Miller said of hound retirement. "It wasn't a decision to depart from what happened before or elsewhere. I grew up with Walker hounds, and they were always trusted members of the family. So it continued from there."



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

 Hound Welfare Fund

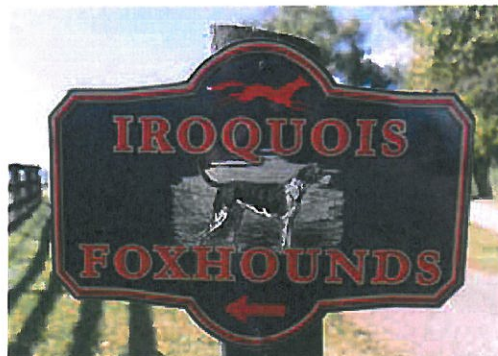
Miller's private, self-funded retirement program prompted others to form the HWF and take up responsibility for caring for the hounds after their hunting days.

"A group of us recognized that Jerry was taking it upon himself to retire the hounds," Mason explained. "We began to worry that once Jerry was gone or the mastership changed that the program might not be carried forward. We wanted to develop a permanent program that didn't rely on the generosity of just one family."

Miller, who also preceded Mason as the Iroquois huntsman, usually breeds only one litter of foxhound puppies a year. That helps the HWF's work by limiting the number of hounds that ultimately retire.

Ambassadors for Iroquois

The Iroquois Hunt and its hounds have a long history in the Bluegrass, an area that was famous for producing hard-running foxhounds at least as far back as the mid-1800s. Noted horse-



Retired foxhounds have plenty of room to stretch their legs and sniff for interesting diversions.

man and hound breeder Gen. Roger D. Williams founded the hunt in 1880, though he didn't name it until the following year, when the racehorse Iroquois caused an international sensation as the first American-bred to capture England's Epsom Derby.

It's fitting that a Bluegrass club should carry the name of a racehorse, but many of the Iroquois foxhounds' pedigrees date back even further than those of the Thoroughbred, whose earliest foundation sire, the Byerley Turk, raced in 1690.

"The father of modern English hunting is considered to be William the Conqueror," Mason said. "In his time the punishment for shooting a hunting dog was to be



MAKING A DIFFERENCE

 Hound Welfare Fund



blinded. He thought of it as a very serious crime. Early hound breeders were royalty and people who had access to ink and paper and were able to keep records. So the hounds' breeding records, in many cases — and in our kennel — go way back."

The pack is studded with show-ring winners and outstanding hunters, but an Iroquois hound doesn't have to achieve celebrity to merit retirement. This year, the HWF Retiree of the Year is 8-year-old Parrish, one of the pack's "plain cooks," Mason said. As Retiree of the Year, Parrish attended a September cocktail party to honor her and the HWF's many supporters, from hunt-country farmers to local businesses that donate items for the organization's annual fundraising dinner and auction in June.

"Parrish was a hard-working hound

and hunted for eight seasons," Mason said. "She can still go out hunting every once in a while, to help steady the puppies. But, like all of our hounds, she gets retired."

The hounds' long history in the area and their warm individual personalities are part of what attract people to volunteer for and donate to the HWF, supporters say.

"One doesn't need to be a hunt member or a hound expert," said Uschi Graham, who serves on the HWF board even though she is not a foxhunter. "I'm certainly not. One just needs, in my opinion, a true passion for dogs in general. They are man's best friend. If one spends some time with the hounds, subsequently one will want to become an ambassador for the Hound Welfare Fund."

Graham got involved in HWF through

Mason says the HWF has learned that hounds indeed can live happily in retirement.

the late philanthropist Hilary Boone Jr., a former Iroquois president. Boone's son, Alex, also has served as honorary chairman of the HWF's June fundraiser. "Lilla Mason also has been a great inspiration to me," Graham added, "because she showed me how deep the bond is between her and the hounds. It starts the day the hounds are born and only gets stronger during training. As a volunteer for the HWF, I help to make certain that these wonderful, loyal, intelligent animals have a deserved and safe place to retire."

In return, the hounds serve both as living history and ambassadors for Iroquois. They have other roles, too. They

are blood donors for the Richmond Road Veterinary Clinic, they offer a steady-
ing influence on summer hound walks
when the young hounds join the pack
for training, and they represent the pack
each year at the Blessing of the Hounds,
the formal ceremony that opens the
hunt season each November.

After 14 years, Mason said, the HWF's
goal now is to fund an endowment. "Our
fundraiser has become more success-
ful each year and we're reaching more
people," she said. "Now we'd like to raise
enough money for an endowment, so
this is always supported, and inspire
other people to make this a standard for
all hunts. It's not just to take care of our
hounds; it's good for the continuation of
the sport." 🐾



The HWF hopes to inspire other hunts to establish formal retirement programs for their hounds.