

Hound Music

By B. J. Campbell

At first glance, you might never have guessed that Mitchell and I were running a seat of the pants operation. For all our plaid wool shirts, logger pants and suspenders, we didn't have a clue about tonight's hunt.

"Oh, sure," you say. "Obviously, you are following three baying hounds across a plowed field on a dark fall night near Plummer, Idaho. So, what's to know?"

First, we were real interested to know what we were chasing. Even though Mitchell was my uncle, we were about the same age and had been tracking white tail deer together since we were kids. In spite of that, we were still in our learning curve on other game. We hoped tonight's find was a raccoon because we had read all about how to do it in the *Full Cry* magazine, and the *American Cooner*.

Our proper equipment, which we ordered from an advertisement in one of the magazines, arrived last month. Right away, we tried out our headlamps, designed to keep our hands free for carrying the 100 foot rope which also came in the mail, the climbing spurs, the spikes. All the equipment necessary for one of us to climb up and convince a treed raccoon to leave the tree and run some more, should we ever find one.

Before we ordered the hounds, we read every possible article for a clue on what all the flap was about. Why would guys want to chase after hounds chasing after an animal of some kind anyway?

The big boys in the magazines seemed to want something else way more than to kill a coon: They wanted to hear the hounds chase it.

We shopped around for the best reasons.

Blue tick hounds, Black and tans, and Red-bones are more likely to have a bawl mouth, our study revealed. Walkers, on the other hand, rarely have a bawl mouth, but the three breeds in the first group usually could be counted on to set

their little dog lips into an "O" shape and produce a long, drawn out wail after wail. Each sound was much the same duration as a train whistle at a crossing and carried about as far. No finer sound in all hounddom.

Other hounds might have a chop mouth. Instead of saying, "Barf, barf," or "yap, yap," like regular dogs, they croak, "ow, ow, ow" or "whump, whump, whump," over and over like some poor slob with laryngitis. A hound with a machine gun chop, a much faster than average "ow, ow," or "whump, whump," is no fun to hear if it happens near your head.

Put together a chop and a bawl, and you have a tenor yodel with an adolescent boy quality. The sound never seems to come out the same twice in a row.

A hound with a turkey yodel is rare and much to be desired. At a distance, you could swear you're hearing a wild turkey gobbler in a great fright. Harold Benson owned the only one I ever heard, a Wyoming Redbone.

None of the hounds we bought had chased and treed anything yet, but we were sure they'd sound good.

I bought Benson's Redbone and named him Spike. Turk, a Maple Hill Black and tan with a beautiful bawl mouth, I acquired by mail from Indiana. Benson sold Jake, a Lee Brothers Bluetick, to Uncle Mitchell because Jake was too slow for a coyote dog. Jake's chop bawl pretty much matched his coursing speed.

Training a hound to do anything is quite a chore, so we hoped they'd be natural solid tree dogs and hammer away vocally once they chased a varmint up a tree. We could hardly wait.

In those days, local people used hounds to catch coyotes that were terrorizing their chickens and small farm animals. The people we knew seldom shot coyotes because they could count on a fast Walker or July hound to chase and kill a coyote single-handedly.

We wanted to chase something dangerous, not a coyote. Rumors abounded that pound for pound, a raccoon is one of the toughest, meanest animals alive. A raccoon would be about right, then. Lots of raccoon populated the area around Uncle Mitchell's farm near Plummer, along the creeks especially. A couple of those cute little bandit-masked, ring-tailed rascals could destroy a field of sweet corn overnight. One raccoon was all it took to pull the heads off all the chickens in the coop. But worst of all, we heard that a coon would grab a hound with those curved front teeth, drag it under water and drown it easily. They were classed as a predator in the mid-1950s. No regulations hampered our efforts. If we ever could catch one coon, we'd be doing the world a service.

Yes, a coon seemed like a dangerous enough prey to get our adrenaline pumping.

"Raccoons are a nocturnal animal," Mitchell quoted from the article in *Full Cry*. "Now, that would mean..."

"...that...uhm...they wander around a lot at night," I surmised.

So we decided to hunt at night, no matter that we both had to work the next day. We drove around by the creek bottom with the dogs in the back of the pickup until we saw shiny eyes by the roadside. There we'd release the baying hounds, expecting a short chase since a Nebraska expert maintained that coon don't run far before they go up a tree.

"How many nights have we stayed up now, chasing dogs all night?" I wondered.

"I think four now," Uncle Mitchell yawned. "Those coyotes they're after just won't tree."

"Yeah, but those hounds sure sound fine," I thought aloud. "I'd listen to 'em in my sleep, if I ever got any sleep." In fact, the hair on the back of my neck always went up and my heart quickened at the sound of hounds in the distance. So far, their long bays came only every few minutes, and we took those as a sign that they were still searching. As yet, we had no idea what their treeing bays would sound like, but their cries while trailing were an important proof of their courage and worth.

Whenever the hounds bayed, we thought,

"Coon!" The trouble was, our dogs seemed more interested in something else.

However, whatever they were chasing now wasn't a coyote. In our vast experience, coyotes didn't usually run in a straight line across a plowed field toward a lighted farmhouse.

Uncle Mitchell and I looked at each other and knew...this could be trouble. We double timed our efforts to keep up.

About fifty yards from the house, we saw the woman of the house open the door and squint into the darkness to see what was causing all that magnificent unusual sound out there in the dark. A black cat landed on the porch without touching any stairs and ran past her feet into the house. Before the woman could back in and pull the door closed, Spike hit the door and steamrolled on through the screen. Turk fit nicely through the new opening, as did Jake after he finally lumbered onto the porch.

As we approached the house, the hound chorus transformed into an interesting blend. We could pick out distinct, rather quick paced "ow ows" and "ow whumps" and "ahooooooooos," "gobble gobbles," hissing and spitting "yeows," "whap whaps" and cries of "Git! Git! Git outa here!"

The "whumps" and "ows" rose an octave and quickened as they went.

"Listen, Bob! Listen," yelled Mitchell. "They've treed! They've treed!"

In truth, their long bays had turned to steady chops. They had something cornered.

Our dogs had a taste of success! And they automatically knew how to tree! Not only that, they had shown us the perceptible change in timbre of their baying when they had their prey situated. I wanted to yell encouragement to them all.

Through the missing door we could see the black cat, bushed out several sizes, marooned on the kitchen table like an arched-backed Halloween centerpiece. Hounds leaped like yoyos, straight up and down, around it. Spike wore remains of wet flowers in his collar while a cracked vase rolled among the dancing, muddy dog feet. Jake pirouetted and landed hard enough

on an upturned kitchen chair to break off one of the chair legs.

For all the woman's yelling and relentless whapping with the broom, the hounds stayed focused on that cat. They wouldn't be detracted from their first sight of any game.

In the living room, aside, the man of the house stood watching the action from a fairly safe distance. When the woman saw his lips turn up into the slightest smile, she abandoned the dogs and went for him with the broom. He shielded his head with his arms against the blows and broke into an outright guffaw. At that, I laughed, too, but I changed my mind when she came after me with the broom.

By then, Mitchell and I each had a leash on a

dog with another dog grabbed by the collar while the woman swept us all outside to the porch.

"Mitchell Flock, you're my neighbor," she snarled through her new hairdo. "My neighbor, for Pete's sake. But who is this person?" She shook the broom in my direction, and I dodged.

"I never saw him before in my life," he said, but the woman still wasn't laughing.

She fined us a princely sum for the havoc to her kitchen. Luckily, she didn't assess damages for the cat's mental anguish, or we'd be poor men today. Based on that big financial break, and such hound music as we heard, seventy-five dollars was a small price to pay.

Best money I ever spent.