

Under the Moonlight

The United Kennel Club's nite hunts attract talented coonhounds and their ultra-competitive owners.

James B. Spencer

You might say that raccoon hunting, with its long and distinctive history, is as American as apple pie. For centuries, the indigenous animal's skin was used to make coonskin caps and full-length raccoon coats for men and women. And, although raccoon meat was never exactly a delicacy, it is edible and has served as food during tough times. Thus, this American mammal was highly sought throughout much of the nation's history.

Raccoons are nocturnal; unless disturbed or desperate, they remain in their dens during the day and must be hunted (or trapped) at night. From these circumstances, the sport of coon hunting developed – a sport in which scenthounds are essential.

Scenthounds at work

Coonhound breeds were developed to satisfy a practical function: lead the hunter to a raccoon. They must have an excellent sense of smell, called a "cold nose," which can pick up trails affected by wind, temperature and dampness. The hound must trail the raccoon through dense cover, bare ground and even water. After the coon climbs a tree, the hound must be able to locate the tree and notify its owner of its whereabouts.

Because raccoon hunts take place at night, the owner's sight is limited, and the hound must communicate vocally. "Mouth" and "tongue" are terms used to describe a hound's notifications. The term "hound music" conveys the enjoyment the owner gets from hearing his hound lead him to the raccoon.

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