

The Dedicated Heart and Soul of the Sandanona Harehounds

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CAPTION PHOTO ABOVE: © DAVID TRAXLER

By ML Ball

YOU HEAR THE HOUNDS long before you see them.

A chorus of deep, full-throated ba-roos melodiously mixed with high-pitched howls enthusiastically greet you as you approach the kennels of the Sandanona Harehounds, located at Thorndale Farm in Millbrook. A sea of wagging tails and panting faces eagerly wanting to make your acquaintance presses against the fenced-in enclosure. Suddenly, you feel like the most beloved person on earth.

Such is the domain of Betsy Park, the organization's Joint Master and Huntsman. In charge of training, hunting and maintaining two packs of hounds, one made up of beagles and the other bassets, Betsy spends her days devotedly carrying on a sport that dates back to at least the 18th century in England—that of following hounds on foot hunting hares.

Founded by Morgan Wing Jr. in 1948, the original Sandanona Beagles took up residence in Thorndale Kennels in 1952, a striking, historic structure built in 1920 by Oakleigh Thorne to house a pack of harriers (harehounds) on his estate.

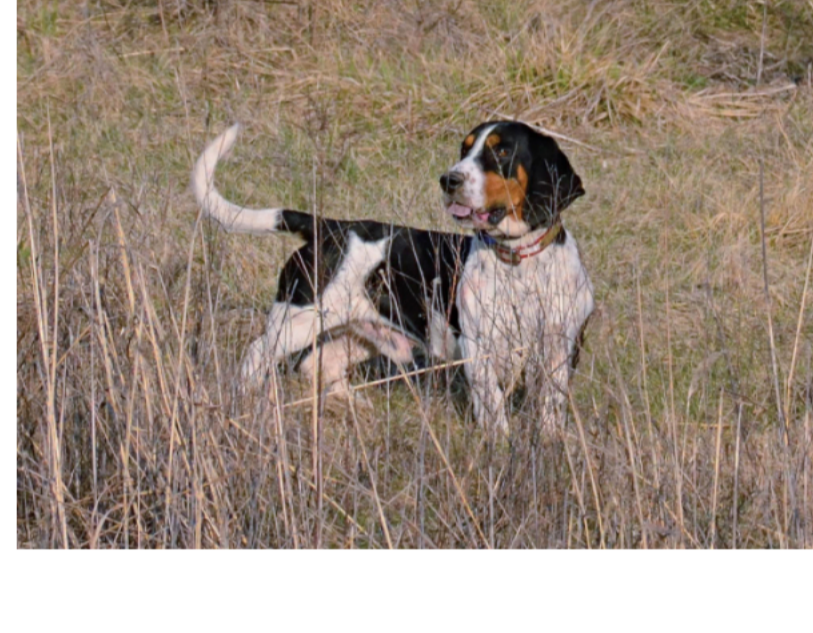
In 1977 (the same year Betsy became Huntsman of the Millbrook Foxhounds), the beagles merged with her private pack of basset hounds, the Flint Hill Bassets, and the Sandanona Harehounds was established. Currently, it is the only organization in the United States maintaining two separate packs of hounds, and is also one of the few remaining large-subscription (member-supported) packs.

So what is the appeal of tramping through fields and thickets early on a dewy morning behind a pack of hounds? According to Betsy, the list is long. "It's great exercise; you're walking, often running, through beautiful countryside among your fellow beaglers, who are a diverse and friendly group, and you don't need a horse or fancy clothes or a lot of money—just a pair of stout boots," she said. "Of course, none of this would be thinkable, let alone possible, without the forbearance, support and encouragement of our hosts—our generous landowners," she emphasized.

In addition, she said, "When you leave home every morning and come to the kennels and go hunting, you never know what's going to happen. No two days are alike. The weather is different, which means the scent is going to be different. Plus, you just might see some critter you've never seen before, like the other day. It might have been a bobcat we came upon, or a very small deer, I still don't know for sure."



BETSY PARK / PHOTOGRAPHED BY LAURIE SZOSTAK



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DELIGHTFULLY CONGENIAL WITH LAYERS of dirt covering her jeans, Betsy seems the quintessential country girl, one who might have grown up on a nearby dairy farm helping her parents with the daily chores.

Actually, not at all.

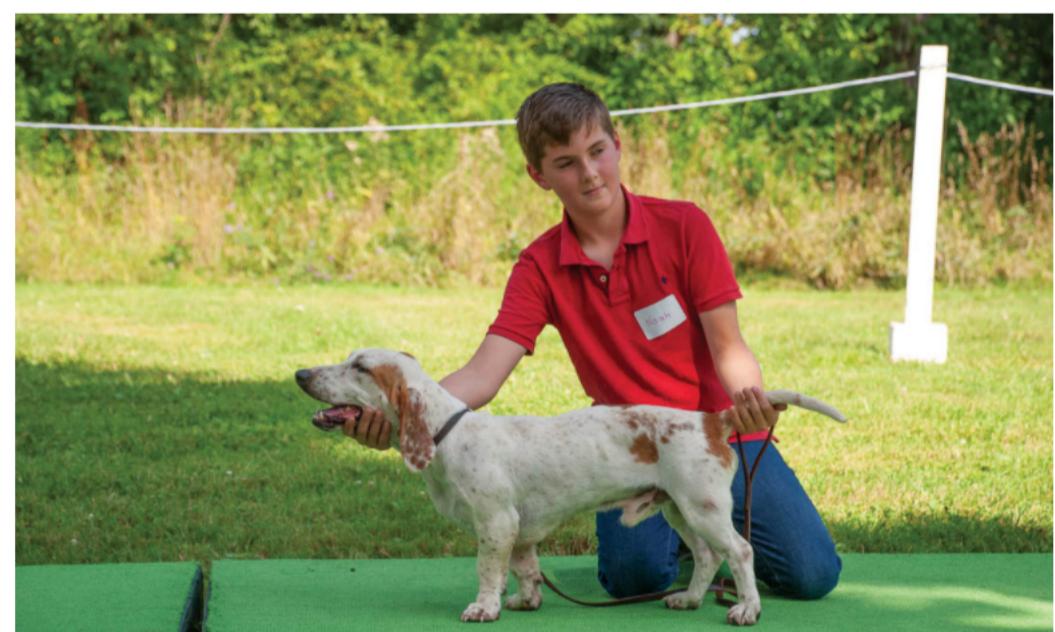
Raised in Bernardsville in Somerset County, New Jersey, from the word go Betsy was obsessed not with hounds but with horses, something she said astonished her parents. "My father was a manufacturing chemist and my mother did all kinds of things. They barely knew which end of a horse ate," she recalled. "We were given two really old horses by our dentist in about 1952 once his kids went off to college. After they died, my parents thought maybe this was something I ought to do, since I was obsessed with it."

Serendipitously, after the free horses came a free pony. "Nothing happens by accident," Betsy stated. "My mother was playing bridge with friends, and her hostess got a telephone call from someone who was looking for a home for a pony. My mother heard the woman say, 'We're not looking for a pony,' and quickly chimed in, 'Oh, but we are.' So at the age of ten, I got a free pony, which was the most unsuitable animal, but somehow I survived and learned how to ride it."

Ironically, it was the recalcitrant pony ("Its former owner was a boy and therefore it had no manners," according to Betsy) that was Betsy's entrée into the world of foxhunting. "I had friends at school who foxhunted, and they encouraged me to join them," she said. "We lived many miles from the hunting country, but I figured out how to get there on my pony, so I foxhunted until I went off to school and then college."

At the same time, while babysitting for someone who was active with the Tewksbury Foot Bassets, Betsy was introduced to a different type of hunting—still following hounds, but on foot rather than on horseback. "I started hunting with the Tewksbury pack and discovered that I loved it," she said. "Hunting on foot, you can see everything. I also found out that I could run, which was great because then I could keep up with the pack."

Betsy's time at college was followed by marriage to Jamie Park (Dean of Faculty at Bennett College at one point, now a composer), parenthood, 27 years as Huntsman of the Millbrook Foxhounds (a paid position) and currently, Joint Master and Huntsman of the Sandanona Harehounds (unpaid). The coming 2018–2019 season will mark Betsy's 42nd year.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY LAURIE SZOSTAK

HOWEVER, LEST ONE THINK Betsy is a one-(wo)man band, she is quick to refute that notion. "I do not wish to give the impression that I do this all by myself," she asserted. "We are a large and complex community, and I have many dedicated friends who help—fostering our young puppies and teaching them everything they need to know to integrate into the pack (Anne Collins), presenting our beagles at the hound shows with utter brilliance (Dorothy Mayo), shouldering some of the responsibilities with me (my Joint Master Gary Dycus), keeping the books (Treasurer Susan Branson), keeping the records (Secretary Betsey Battistoni), plus hosting Hunt teas and exercising the hounds when I'm out of town. And then our indispensable employee Natacha Kondratiev, without whom none of this would be possible."

Betsy adds that although she is the center and inspiration for the organization, without the support and assistance of a multitude of people, including the monetary contributions of almost 100 subscribers, "[w]e would be over in a week."

But lack of supporters is not what potentially threatens the Sandanona Harehounds' future. It's who will take it on when Betsy decides to retire. "Well, that's the problem," she lamented. "Another me is unlikely to come along in this electronic age. I just hope every day that someone will."

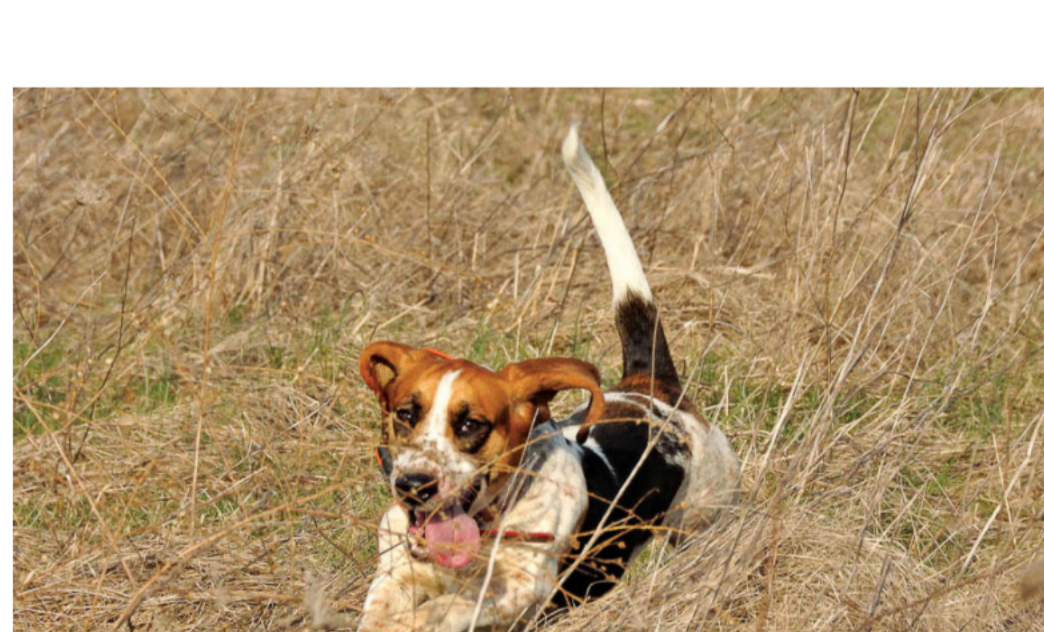


PHOTO: © DAVID TRAXLER

And there's the bugaboo—the fact that nowadays, people are so addicted to their screens, rather than enjoying the great outdoors. "Children are not running around collecting frogs and grasshoppers and bugs," Betsy said. "In a typical suburb, there are no children in the street. They're all inside or at a supervised activity like soccer practice or at summer camp. You don't see kids just out riding their bikes or playing in the dirt or doing the things that kids did forever. For this reason, I think there are very few young people coming along who understand how hunting a pack of hounds works, who can anticipate what is going to happen out hunting and be in the right place to see whatever that might be. It's hard to explain to somebody who hasn't done this."



PHOTOGRAPHED BY LAURIE SZOSTAK

Possibly, hopefully, the next generation of supporters will be found at the Sandanona Harehounds' annual Puppy Show, held each July. Beagle and basset puppies around a year old are shown by local children and judged by respected members of the wider hunting community. For decades, exhibitors were the children and grandchildren of the organization's subscribers, but recently, children from the local 4-H Club and from a Millbrook Moms group have gotten involved. Might the packs' future rest in their hands?

"I hope so," said Betsy. "But people have changed. As an example, two years ago I took my grandchildren to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. What struck me was that so many people were rushing through the galleries, taking pictures of the art on their phones, instead of slowing down and looking at it. I don't understand this."

As far as hunting hounds on foot, "I don't know where our sport lies in the future, or how long people will enjoy going out into the countryside following a pack of hounds doing what they've been bred to do for centuries, which is really something to see," Betsy said.

For all of our sakes, let's hope for a long, long time.

To learn more about the Sandanona Harehounds or become a subscriber, [contact Betsy Park](#).