

Another Incredible Basenji Search Success: Penny Is Found After Three Weeks In Woods

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Do you believe in miracles?

They do in Enumclaw.

What are the odds of two basenjis escaping from the same dog-show site two consecutive years and being found alive more than three weeks later?

That's what happened again this year near the Olympic Kennel Club dogfest at the King County Fairgrounds in August. And once again Janine Prindle, an Enumclaw 4-H leader, provided her infectious energy and relentless commitment to the search during a wrenching saga accented with countless emotional zigs and zags.

"It's very unusual for a dog to escape from show grounds and not be found," said Bill Holbrook of Sequim, an American Kennel Club field representative. "I can remember only one other occasion when it happened in the Northwest. A saluki fled from a show in Kennewick in the early 1980s and was never found. But when you consider the dozens of events conducted by the AKC each year, that makes it a rarity."

In August 1996, a basenji named Dakota escaped its pen at the King County Fairgrounds and was apprehended 38 days later after hundreds of hours of searching and networking by Prindle, the dog's owners from Florida, the California handler and area residents. By the time Dakota was coaxed into a nervous rescuer's arms, it had lost half its body weight and was flea infested. The dog is home in Florida now, fully recovered.

This summer's saga took similar turns, with a few new twists and sightings that left a vapor trail of frustration and hope. The central character was Penny, a 4-year-old pooch that ran from an AKC-sanctioned lure-coursing event conducted by the Evergreen Basenji Club of Seattle in an open field several hundred feet from the fairgrounds Aug. 16.

Owned by Gary and Cynthia Hildebrand of Pendleton, Ore., Penny was shown in conformation earlier in the day, then taken down the road for the lure trial.

Thought of leaving early

"I groomed her and told Gary that she was probably coming into season," recalls Cynthia, "since she was not acting normal. I even suggested we leave early without running her in the lure competition."

But they remained - Gary to exhibit another dog while Cynthia took Penny lure-coursing.

"The grass was tall and wet, and dark clouds were moving toward the area, which hinted a threat of rain," Cynthia recalled. "While I was waiting with her on lead, I had a nagging feeling not to release her."

Ignoring her instincts, Hildebrand walked over to the start line. "It began to rain just as the hunt master called 'Tally ho!' and I slipped her lead."

Penny sprinted to the first turn but when the lure took a hard right the dog missed it and headed straight ahead. The lure operator attempted to attract Penny's attention but the basenji headed back toward a friend's motorhome in which Hildebrand and the dog were driven to the event. Not recognizing the vehicle, Penny started running about a nearby golf course and into the woods.

The surrounding property is speckled with newer homes, the golf course and edges on thickly forested Weyerhaeuser Co. land.

A short time later, Penny was spotted and chased to no avail. At that point, a panicked Hildebrand put out a call to her husband at the conformation show at the fairgrounds. He came running in suit and tie and immediately began to search for Penny.

"He saw her twice," said Hildebrand, "but she refused to come."

Rumors quickly flew around the emptying fairgrounds about sightings. One even had the dog being struck by a vehicle. None was confirmed, however.

About 6 o'clock that evening, Penny was seen on the run about 1 1/2 miles away.

Amidst the flurry of activity, the Hildebrands approached Prindle and told her what had happened.

"Would I help them?" they asked. "How could I get involved in another basenji search after last year? But how could I say no, either. I couldn't," says Prindle.

Recalling her Dakota game plan the previous year, the cool and controlled Prindle waited until early the following morning to get things organized.

This included a trip to the local newspaper office to place a lost-dog advertisement and see if a reporter would be interested in writing a story; finding a copy shop open to print posters; and mobilizing her 4-H members to attach posters to nearby fence posts, telephone poles, newspaper boxes and anything else they could find in this rural area.

Sightings offered hope

The next few days several more sightings were reported to Prindle - whose telephone number was on the poster. When possible, she sped to the sites, most of which were east of Enumclaw off Highway 410, coming up empty on each occasion.

After a couple of days of searching, the Hildebrands returned to their central Oregon home. Cynthia, however, made the five-to-six-hour drive to Enumclaw the following three weekends to "maintain hope and keep the plight fresh in everyone's mind.

"I had a simplified poster printed on T-shirts, which I wore the entire time I was in the area. I had posters taped on my van. I looked so desperate that many took pity on me."

She admits it was not easy approaching residents time and again, repeating her story. "I dreaded talking about how she got away. People were having trouble believing that I would spend so much effort on a dog that was not a valuable animal."

On the weekends, Prindle, Hildebrand and other volunteers combed the nearby woods and hills for Penny, affixing posters on visible fence posts, trees and car windshields.

"This was all about friends and moral support," emphasized Hildebrand. "They kept me going physically and psychologically. They rode with me to keep up my spirits as much as lending their eyes on the nearby fields and hills."

Her support group also included:

-- Erin Roberts of Oklahoma City, Okla., handler of Champion Zindika's Johnny Come Greatly, the No. 1 basenji in America. Roberts drove around the rural area with the dog in the back seat of her rental car for several hours the day following the show until it came time to catch her flight home.

-- Weyerhaeuser Co. security personnel, who issued Hildebrand a permit and loaned her a key to enter nonpublic grounds, even after the property had been closed due to fire danger. "Their log-truck drivers spotted Penny several times and used their CBs to warn other drivers so as not to hit her," said Hildebrand. "They even placed some of their lunch out while trying to lure her within reach."

-- Then there was the Mount Rainier National Park worker who took her day off to walk along the Weyerhaeuser Main Line Road with dog cookies in her pocket, hoping she'd see Penny.

And the postal carrier who was distressed when she saw the dog walking along the narrow shoulder of busy Highway 410 while cars whisked by at speeds of 60 and 65 m.p.h.

-- Or the people of Greenwater who drove with food, several stopping after spotting her and trying to coax her into their cars.

-- The supervisor at Mud Mountain Dam, Larry Ems, and his employees who kept watch for Penny, eventually spotting her on the dam's spillway. Ems let Hildebrand through locked gates and even sent his security guard to check on her while she slept in her van.

-- A nameless man who hiked out of the woods. "We talked for a minute and he offered to help," Cynthia said. "I mentioned that I could use some mosquito spray and he pulled some out of his bulging jacket. He refused money and then disappeared back into the woods. Later that evening I decided this guy was really an angel."

Key sighting

And a Washington State patrolman who gave Hildebrand and Prindle a key sighting Sept. 4 near Scatter Creek off Highway 410 that ultimately led to the dog's capture. Upon receiving the report, Prindle and her husband Jack went to the area with a humane trap loaned by a local basenji club.

Labor Day weekend Hildebrand returned again from Pendleton. "I caught a glimpse of Penny once," she recalled, "but she wouldn't come near the van. It was like she was emotionally teasing me."

Sunday night, Hildebrand became discouraged, packed up and returned home, her psychological landscape shattered. "So close, yet so far. I was beginning to think Penny might be on borrowed time. If she wasn't hit by a vehicle on Highway 410, she was prey for a cougar, coyote or bear in the nearby woods."

Upon finishing some household chores the following afternoon, the Prindles decided to return and check the trap, situated about seven miles from their Enumclaw home and 50 feet off Highway 410.

"We crawled under the gate on the Main Line Road," recalled Janine Prindle. "When Jack approached the trap I saw something move and he noticed the door was down. As we got right in front, I remember saying, 'I can't believe it. It's Penny!"

"It was the same ecstatic feeling I had the previous year when we found Dakota after 38 days. I couldn't wait to get home and call Cynthia." This time it was 22 days.

Hildebrand had spent much of the day in bed. "I was mentally and physically exhausted," she adds. "I got up and went outside to feed my other dogs when the phone rang about 4 o'clock. By the time I reached it, I heard Janine's excited voice on the recorder saying, 'We have a little red and white girl who wants to come home.'"

A short time later, Hildebrand was on the road again - to Enumclaw - this time not with apprehension and hope but sheer ecstasy.

"I was on Cloud Nine all the way," she said, "But I was wondering what kind of shape Penny was in."

Penny was a bit stoic when she first cast eyes on Hildebrand, but it didn't take long for her to warm up.

Happy trip home

After a short visit and many "thank yous," Hildebrand headed for Pendleton once again, this time with contented four-legged company.

Despite more than three weeks on the run, Penny weighed 16 pounds when rescued, a loss of only five pounds. That's all been regained.

"We're done with lure coursing for a while," smiled Hildebrand. "We're still cherishing the fact we got her back alive."

And, oh, yes, a reward of \$250 went to Prindle, who modestly objected before finally accepting it.

"She's a godsend," concluded Hildebrand. "This rescue was all about community, but Janine coordinated it. Without her continued efforts I'm not certain Penny would have been found. But she and many others persevered. They simply wouldn't let Penny go without a good fight."

A byproduct of Penny's adventure has been a behavioral transformation of sorts. "She's become a much more friendly dog," said Hildebrand. "Before, she was somewhat cold. You never know how something like this will affect an animal's psyche."

From the owner's standpoint, the experience was highly spiritual. "It became very discouraging after a point," she admitted, "but I turned it over to God and he saw fit to get her home."

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