

Where there is “Smoke” there is fire!

Hilton Gary Sanders

The early morning stillness was rent by a deep, melodious bawl, a primeval sound that never ceases to cause the hair on my neck to stand on end. A good nose full of bushpig scent had triggered the bawl to bellow from Smoke. Now would begin the slow and painstaking work of unravelling the previous night's feeding track. This slow trailing would result in us finding the pigs' nest and in the eventual shooting of a trophy pig by our client.

It was great to pick up the September 2010 issue of *African Outfitter* and read the article “Spike” written by my good friend and fellow outfitter and PH, Jason van Aarde. Jason and I have been friends for many years and over that time have shared some fun times, some sad times, some great times and even some downright crazy head-shaking times.

One of these head-shaking times occurred when hunting leopard and elephant in Botswana with an American client. The Botswana PH that we were working with had the habit of waking up at the given hour of 4 am and then yelling at the top of his lungs for his staff. The staff stayed in their own camp about 500 metres (547 yards) from our camp!



left to right The late Arthur Hamilton, the late Nati Goba, Dave Pullen and Stimela Sokhela pictured with Lead, Smoke and Cracker, and an old bushpig boar.

Smoke's son Soot, the new legend!

On the second morning our chef, Charles, who was very annoyed at such unprofessional behaviour, suggested to the offending PH that he should rather use his vehicle for the task of raising his staff in the mornings. That night, after a hard day's hunting, followed by a hot shower and an excellent meal under the stars, we headed for bed. Jason and I joked with each other that at least the next morning we would not have the African dawn spoiled by yelling!

I remember lying in bed and listening to the beautiful symphony of sounds that one hears in the African bush. As I was dozing off, the calls of a fiery-necked nightjar were being replaced by the approaching, haunting whoops of a clan of spotted hyenas that busied themselves in camp every night after lights out. Sleep had overtaken me and my weary body melted into the mattress.

A split second before my alarm went off to signal the start of another glorious day in Africa, I jumped up from bed with my heart in my mouth. I had dreamt that I was almost run over by a white Toyota Land Cruiser hunting vehicle, with its horn (hooter) blaring full bawl! What was going on? The horn was still blaring!

On scrambling out of the tent, I met both Jason and Charles standing in front of the dining area and shaking their heads. Our local PH had used his vehicle to summons his staff, but not in the quiet manner we had expected it to be done!

As I read Jason's article on his dog Spike it brought back memories of the times that I have had the pleasure of watching Spike caste to and fro in the mountains of the eastern Free State for francolin. Then I got to thinking of the times that Jason has hunted over my hounds for both leopards and bushpigs with clients and just as buddies. That is when my mind drifted to my dog Smoke.

Smoke was one of six progeny from the purposeful and much debated mating of a bloodhound bitch and a bluetick dog. Both of Smoke's parents were highly experienced and hard-driving hounds that had accounted for many a wily leopard. They performed well, often under very adverse conditions characterised by high ambient temperatures and dry, dusty, windswept ground. It was their ability to push these very difficult trails to a positive conclusion that led to their mating.



Shibas and some of the hounds belonging to THE BOX H BIG GAME HOUNDS (all deceased now). Smoke is second from the right.

Six pups were born to the litter. Two were destined for hunting bushpigs and four for leopard hunting. The four that became leopard hunters all excelled at their work and have gone on to breed many good hounds. The two that were to become hunters of the fierce and hard-running bushpig consisted of a male whose career was cut untimely short and a droopy-eared bitch called Smoke. Smoke, who was more tan than black, came into our kennels when she was eight weeks old, just as Simon and I had agreed.

Right from the word go Smoke was an exceptional hound; she was a friendly, gentle soul that loved the attention my youngest three sons and daughter showered on her. She was a "soft" hound, which means that she was easy to train, be it the kennel routine or the exercise walks and later the art of hunting. Smoke was eager to please and a hound that listened when disciplined by voice commands. She was definitely not like many of her half-relatives on her father's side, namely the bluetick. Bluetick hounds, when trained, are hard to beat on a cold scent (old scent that most other hounds would not be able to trail at all) but they sure can be hard-headed!

I remember well the very first time we took Smoke out on a hunt. My late friend Arthur Hamilton was with me along with huntsmen and trackers Nati Goba (who has also unfortunately passed on to the happy hunting grounds) and Shibas Tota. (You will get to know a bit more about Nati and Shibas as I will soon be writing an article about them for the series "Trackers – the other forgotten half" in this magazine.)

On my father-in-law's farm we found fresh diggings in the middle of a road that ran next to the Umgeni River. Shibas released old man Split along with Vonk (Afrikaans for "spark"), two of my lead/strike hounds. As they emptied themselves just before getting down to business, Smoke put her nose in the fresh diggings, threw her head back and let rip with what would become her customary bawl of "Who-Who-Whoooo!". Nati looked at Shibas and then at me and without a word he slipped Smoke's lead from around her neck.

She took off at a slow shuffle, following the tracks of the bushpigs and uttering her long, drawn-out bawls at regular intervals. Split and Vonk fell in with her and away

they went. Smoke was the first to bay at the nest that day and we went on to shoot two big bushpig sows that morning along with a three-quarter grown boar. They all had bellies full of fresh, ripe maize.

This was Smoke's first introduction to hunting and from that warm December morning she only got better and better. I think that over the years we must have shot about 550 bushpigs due to Smoke's excellent trailing abilities. Smoke became a legend amongst a great many of our clients, landowners as well as fellow houndsmen. Most times on arrival at a property where we had hunted before, the farmer would enquire where Smoke was. If it was a new property or venue that we were hunting, the landowner or manager would invariably ask, "And which one is Smoke?"

Smoke became an absolute character as the years went by and she just became better and better at her job. For instance, once both Split and Vonk had died, Smoke used to work with another bitch called Tombi and two of Tombi's daughters called Wednesday and Friday, as our lead hounds. But once Wednesday and Tombi were

dead Smoke refused to work with any other hound except Friday! This made the training of the next generation of lead dogs very difficult.

We even tried letting a young dog go once Smoke was a good way down the scent trail. However, as soon as the young trainee hound caught up to Smoke she would sniff the hound from nose to tail, walk over to the nearest shade and stay there until the young hound was caught and put back on a lead by the huntsman. Then, with a quick shake from nose to tail, off she would go on the trail again! Smoke liked to work a scent at a fairly good pace if the going was good. This would take her away from me or my huntsman and even though we could hear her, Smoke would stop and wait for us to catch up and then off she would go again, leading us ever closer to the bushpigs' nest.

This continued right up until we let two of her own sons, Soot and Coke, go with her. The day we did this the two youngsters were only 10 months old. Smoke settled down on the spoor and slowly worked it forward. At one stage Soot moved away from Smoke to search through a pile of stones that the pigs had passed at a distance of about 3 metres (just a tad over 3 yards). Smoke stopped trailing, went up to Soot and with a good bit of growling, mouthed and roughed him up good and proper. Then back to trailing she went with her sons in tow!

I have never seen this behaviour in a lead hound or any hound before or since. The wonderful thing is that Smoke trained both of those pups who have, since the passing of Smoke, become top-notch lead hounds in their own right. I am also blessed to own another of Smoke's progeny, a dog by the name of Strike; he is a stalwart of our cat pack and a rock-solid, eager-to-please hound just as his mother was.

Smoke was a legend in her own time and a true lady. I miss her voice and soft brown eyes, but as I look at her grandsons and granddaughters, I feel excitement course through my veins at the prospect of a new Smoke amongst them. 🐾

Smoke's son **Strike,** a stalwart of our cat pack

