

REQUIEM FOR A HEAVYWEIGHT - By Bear Claw

Written by Texas Outdoors

Tuesday, 06 December 2011 18:07

PROLOGUE – DECEMBER 2011

I have long owed a debt to a very close friend. I have carried this debt in my heart for a very long time, and I promised myself someday I'd tell the story for others to read.

Dogs and outdoors activities go together in so many ways. As a hunter, I dreamed for years of having a dog to train and share my hunting time with.

At the time, I couldn't talk myself into paying a premium for a pedigreed bird dog.

I had trained a couple of other dogs for various things and figured I could start with a dog with some basic instincts and get him to do what I wanted.

Hector taught me humility. We were told he was an Irish Setter/Labrador cross. After he reached maturity, we figured it was Irish Setter/Newfoundland, so he didn't have the retrieving machine instinct I had hoped for.

On the other hand, he became a local legend with pheasants.

As it turned out, he trained me.

I'd never win a field trial, but he got me where we could handle an upland game field pretty well!

Hector graced my life for thirteen years. Back when heartworm medicine was a daily affair during mosquito season, apparently one fall, we failed to give it quite long enough.

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I felt like we failed him, but I think he understood.

Life must go on.

I often hear that if you're lucky, you get one good dog.

I've had a few dogs, and several that I was very close to, but only one that managed to reach so deep into my life and heart.

This is for Hector, told from my point of view.

In fact, it's my little dialogue.

OCTOBER, 1975

"Hello, I was wondering if this is the correct number for the puppies you advertised. Half Irish Setter and half Labrador?

MAYBE Labrador, huh?

He was good at fence jumping, you say?

Only five dollars?

Your town is behind Cannon Air Base over in New Mexico, right?

Then I'll be there in about an hour.

You see I just got out of college and am teaching in a small town in Texas.

I'd like an outdoor dog that might retrieve ducks.

With all the ducks around here, the local farmers just about welcome you over to shoot the ducks, and I thought maybe I could train a pup like this.

Oh, the mother doesn't get in the water?

Well, I think I can train one of them.

You say they're only 4 weeks old but getting too big for your yard.

I think I'd like to see them!"

Later, that day.

"Look, honey, that big clumsy one that came running out first. He is chewing my shoe lace and pulling my pant legs. I can work

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with him.

He

's solid black and as big as the 3 month old Cocker at the vets, and he's only 4 weeks old.

I think I'll call him Hector.

He'll grow into that name, you bet!

I can call him Heck!"

NOVEMBER, 1975

"Well, Honey, I am already starting to train Hector. He is already up to 25 pounds and will go get the tennis ball three times before he quits and goes back to sit on the porch.

I'm going to bring back one of those teal when I get back from puddle jumping, and hold it in his mouth and get him used to ducks.

He's gonna be GREAT!"

MARCH 1976

"Hey Honey, did you see Hector? I walked with him over to the prairie dog town, so he could get used to the shooting, but as soon as I fired the first shot, he headed off to the house.

Now that he's nearly 30 inches at the shoulders, he can get home a lot faster than I can.

Yeah, there he is snoozing on the porch."

MAY 1976

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“Hey, Tom, long time since we talked. I’m hoping for a good waterfowl season next year. We’ve got a lot of tailwater pits lined up.

I’m still trying to get Hector trained to retrieve.

He will run after the ball three times, and then hide the ball in the weeds and go sit on the porch.

I’m beginning to wonder which one of us is getting trained.”

JULY 4th, 1976

“Listen to that dog moan. Seems like a few little fireworks blocks away have him scared to death!

I guess I’ll bring him in. Hope it doesn’t mean he’s gun shy!”

AUGUST 1976

“Sorry coach. Yeah, I know you were real proud of your German Shepherd, but if you wanted to avoid problems, you shouldn’t have sic’d him on Hector. Yeah, I know he doesn’t

look like a fighter, but he always runs over aggressive dogs like that, and when ‘Killer’ started after him, Hector just kept running back and forth knocking him down every time.

I’m sorry for your dog.

I’m pretty sure he’ll come back out of your garage in a week or so.

It’s that 9 yard stride of Hector’s.

I don’t think he really hurt ‘Killer’.”

SEPTEMBER 1976

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“Hey, Jim, Let’s go out and get some teal. It’s early season. I’ve been training Heck. He’ll follow hand signals, which he’s really good at, and come, at least most of the time he’ll come. Well, he did yesterday. I’m going to bring back a teal to get Hector to hold and heel.”

NOVEMBER 1976

“Hey Tom, watch this. That mallard hen over there is down and can’t fly. I’m going to position Hector right over him.”

“See, I’ve got him standing right over the duck. Now, Heck, PICK ‘IM UP!! NO!! NOOO! NOOOO!”

“Yes, Tom, that’s the first time I’ve seen a dog pee on a duck like that. Maybe it was a mistake force training him with the ducks in his mouth. Or it is possible he’s just not a hunter?”

LATER THAT MONTH

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“Honey, you’ll never guess where I found Heck. He got loose in the snow storm, and had run over to the gin down the road. He was running around and around a cotton trailer. There was something under the trailer. When I called him, he ran under the trailer, and flushed about 30 pheasants out from under the trailer. I know where we’ll be come pheasant season next week.”

DECEMBER 1976

“Back, Heck. Good dog!”

“I don’t know. I wish I could say I trained him. He just takes to the field naturally. But he doesn’t retrieve. He bounces up and down like a kangaroo. I think he’s looking up and down the rows for birds. Never seen it before. And he automatically works back and forth in front of all six hunters. He’s flushed more birds than we have ever seen. Yesterday, we worked a fence line, and he busted out through the brush piles, and got me bunnies as well as a limit of pheasants. When he gets too far out of range, I call him, and when he needs to go ahead, I just tell him BACK.”

“Whoa, Heck. Good Dog. Now Back!”

“No, I don’t know. He just figured it out, too. Maybe he’ll work out after all.”

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MARCH 1976

“Yeah, I brought Hector along on this scout trip. I’m scoutmaster (as a result of an election held when I was gone) and we are going to spring campout here, and its still COLD at night.

I figured I’d have Hector in my camper shell and he could help keep me warm.

You’d think a 120 pound dog would be warm.

Well, I guess he was, but he just curled up in a ball and not only didn’t help me get warm, but pushed me out of my spot in the truck.

But the scouts love him.

He went along on an epic snipe hunt along the edge of the caprock last night, and stayed up by the campfire.

The kids love him!

Now I get to ride back in the pickup cab with a wet smelly dog.

It’s worth it!”

MAY 1976

“Hey, Honey. It’s funny when you hold your cookie over your head and Hector reaches up without leaving the ground and takes it away. He didn’t even touch your fingers!”

JULY 4th, 1976

“Well, he’s still afraid of fireworks. I guess if there’s game to hunt, he doesn’t worry about it, but a few kids 5 blocks away with a string of Black Cat firecrackers”

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AUGUST 1976

"I dunno, Jim. Every time I work with him, he retrieves the tennis ball three times, then stuffs it in the weeds. Lately, it's been in that corner where he does his business. I think Hector is trying to tell me something. I'm worried that he's not going to turn out to be the duck hunter I was hoping for!"

SEPTEMBER 1976

"Well, lookie there! Hector has brought back all 5 doves I managed to hit! Maybe there's hope, yet."

OCTOBER 1976

"Sorry officer. He always tried to ride behind my head on the pickup seat."

"Yes, sir. I know he's way to big. It is just hard to keep him over on his side while I'm driving a manual shift truck!"

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NOVEMBER 1976

"I like your 260 Z car, Tom. I'm sorry Hector has crawled in and won't get out. I think maybe he's upset that we didn't take him along.
If you can push him over and drive around the block, I think he'll get out when you get back."

10 MINUTES LATER

"See, it worked. Now, we'll see if he can get the ducks out of the ponds for us."

2 HOURS LATER

"I'm sorry about that. The only duck you got, and he did it again. That's the SECOND time I've seen a dog do that!"

DECEMBER 1976

"Hey, Charlie. You gonna be able to get your thousand bucks back from the trainer you sent your German Shorthair off to?
what is it, yeah NOTHING!
RABBIT."
rabbits in front of bird dogs is a SIN, but Hector never seemed to mind.)

Seems like it's Hector 4 pheasants and 6 quail to,
Oh, yeah, and a
(Shootin'

"Yeah, I know, he's not supposed to bring it back to the shooter, but that seems to be his idea."

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He brings it to the guy who got the bir.....HECTOR!! Gee WHIZ!
What are you rolling in???
That calf was not WELL!
OH, gosh, you're going to have to ride back in my truck!
YUCK!!"

MAY 1977

"Oh, I like that. Big black and shiny, with a mouth filled with bright white ivory, so he's a Steinway Setter!

Like a grand piano.

I get it!

The neighbor lady sez that when she came back, she saw two eyes and all those white teeth glaring out of the darkness, and yelled 'Hector, is that you?' and he came up wagging that massive tail and slobbering all over.

Made her feel safe!"

NOVEMBER 1977

"Yeah, I bring old Hector with me every time I can, which is almost daily during duck season, but he and I have an agreement, I won't ask him to get a duck, and he won't pee on it any more! If there is a bunny or quail to flush, he knows what to do.

We're both just waiting for pheasant season.

Too bad I couldn't convince him to carry a duck, but he's good company."

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“Thanks for the invite to hunt your field, sir. I appreciate being included in your traditional family hunt.
He’ll be fed and ready to hunt.”

Oh, yes, I understand, I’ll be there with Hector.

NEXT DAY

“Thank you sir. He’s a natural. I think he trained me..... OMIGOSH!! Hector, get OFF of that cow pie!!
just getting last year’s mess out of my truck cab!”

Gee whiz, I’m

MAY 1978

“Honey, you think your Dad would take Hector while I go back to college. We won’t have room where we’re staying.
He’s been a good bird dog.
We can go see him every weekend, and I’ll take him hunting when I can.”

JULY 4th, 1978

“Hi, Howard. How’s Hector doing?”

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“Yeah, he always whines and moans like that while they’re shooting off fireworks. Nope, he doesn’t seem to be gun shy when there’s birds to chase!
He’ll be fine!”

NOVEMBER 1978

“Thanks for the invite, Greg. Yes, I hunt pheasants. We can drive up to your place opening morning. Mind if I bring old Hector. He’s quite the pheasant dog. He handles a field like no one else.”

DECEMBER 1978

“Yep, we got limits for EVERYONE. And he brings the birds back to the guy that hunts. I’m just sorry about you feeling guilty, Terry.
But I don’t think he’s judging your shooting.
Well, maybe he is just a bit disappointed, it was a nice bunch of roosters!”

“Oh my GOSH, knock him off that cow pie!! It’s a FRESH one. I have to drive all the way back to Lubbock with him in the cab!!”

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NOVEMBER 1979

“Yea, Greg. Well, I’d rather bring Hector myself. I can get there in time for opening. I think he’ll do even better this year.”

DECEMBER 1979

“Well, you guys are yelling ‘Come BACK!’ The last thing he hears is BACK, that means to hunt ahead!
I’m the one who’s supposed to yell at him”

“Stupid cow flops!!”

MAY 1981

“Thanks, Howard. I appreciate you keeping him while we were in school these years. I know you and Hector are close.

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I think I can hunt him a lot where we're moving.
There are a lot of birds in Lamb County, and we'll be in a real small town."

DECEMBER 1981

"Hey, Greg, it's great to get back together again and hunt the birds, like we did in college. For me, it's only about a half hour drive.
You had to fly up from Lake Jackson.
Yeah, Hector is still flushing and retrieving.
He's a real machine on pheasants, but don't ask him to get a duck.
HECTOR, GET OFF THAT COW PIE!"

DECEMBER 1982

"Thanks for the chance to hunt your in-law's farm, Doug. Hector and I love pheasant hunting. He's slowed down a bit, and works well with just the two of us.
It's been pretty dry this year, and he has trouble smelling them when it's YUCK, I didn't know you had calves here!!
Hector, get off that!"

JULY 4th, 1983

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“Gee Whiz, the neighbors are getting TIRED of his whining. I guess he’ll have to spend the night inside!
Too many fireworks!”

MAY 1985

“No, doctor, we try to give him his daily pill to prevent heartworm from the first warm nights in early spring until the first hard freeze in the fall. I guess he got heartworm from a late season mosquito. I know it is dangerous to treat an older dog, especially one that has lived his whole life outside for heartworm. We’ll take care of him.”

DECEMBER 1987

“You should have seen it, Honey. He and I were tired. I had helped him up that last ditch, and I got out my sandwich and thermos, and shared a late lunch in the field with Hector. Greg wasn’t there this year, so it was just Hector and me. After about 30 minutes, I got up, and a pheasant had been hiding in the overgrown grass at the edge of the field, and flushed. I shot and clipped bird hard, but he kept flying. Hector jumped up like he was a kid, and followed the bird nearly a half mile, and brought him back. The guy who was harvesting cotton in the next section got off his stripper, and drove over to tell me it was the best retrieve he ever saw and shook my hand. I could only whisper ‘Thank you’. I sat with the pheasant and Hector’s head in my lap until the sun went down. Had to pick him up and get him in the pickup.”

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JULY 4th, 1988

“I worry, honey. I don't think he can hear the fireworks. We'll keep him in the kitchen.”

JULY 6th, 1988

“Doctor, I know he's bad. I've been bringing his food over to him when he whines for it, but today, he couldn't eat. I think it's time, he's so miserable now. I'll hold him, if you don't mind. You give him the shot. I think he understands.”