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# BULLETIN

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## Out of the CONGO

An Interview with Michael Work







*All photos by Michael Work unless otherwise noted.*

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# Out of the CONGO

**An interview with Michael Work about his most recent Congo expedition**

**Interviewer: Andrew Sawler**

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Michael Work is a household name in the Basenji community. He received his first Basenji, Ch. Maki-la Motane Moke, as a gift from his parents in 1966. "Flame" would go on to produce 23 champions under Michael's Sirius prefix, setting a producing record that would stand for more than 30 years. Since those early days, Michael has become a successful all breed handler presenting Best in Show winners in Non Sporting, Terrier and Hound Groups. He has won Best of Breed at the Basenji Club of America National Specialty four times. Michael's contributions to our breed and our club, as a breeder, exhibitor and mentor continue to benefit us all. Michael sat down with us to talk about his most recent trip to the Congo.

**Andrew (AS):** Michael, what year was the first trip to Africa Jon Curby organized to obtain foundation stock?

**Michael (MW):** 1987 — Jon Curby and I went to the Congo in February 1987.

**AS:** How many trips organized by Jon have there been now in total to the Congo?

**MW:** Five, this was the fifth trip.

**AS:** Have you been on all of them?

**MW:** Three of the five.

**AS:** Was there something about this year that made you want to go now?



Photo by Jon Curby



**MW:** It's been a while, I was available, and it is sort of an addiction. Once you're there you can't really describe it. I wanted to see how the country had changed — what you might see now compared to what you saw before.

We had a diverse group of people and that is inviting. There are people that you are going with that you think would be interesting to be with to see it.

I thought it was important to make this trip in support of Jon. Jon has done every trip. We are all getting a little bit older. And there is the fact that this country and so many countries in Africa have been drawn into debilitating civil wars. You do not know where you might be able to go tomorrow or in ten years. While we were on this trip, the Presidential Palace some 1500 kilometers from where we were came under attack.

It seems every fifteen or twenty years the ruling dictator gets overthrown and then you don't know if the country is going to be cut off or if there will be a total civil war as in the Sudan or what is going to happen.

**AS:** Where exactly in Africa did you go this year?

**MS:** We worked out of Dungu in the Congo.

**AS:** Who went with you?

**MW:** Jon Curby, Fritz Clark, the photog-

rapher, Carrie Lewis from Vermont (a whip-pet fancier), Bev Reid from Australia, Katie Campbell from Seattle and Ethel Blair from Australia.

**AS:** Can you tell us a little bit about how the trip works? Where does the flight arrive?

**MW:** Different trips we've taken different paths. This trip most of us went from Boston to Amsterdam, from Amsterdam to Entebbe in Uganda. Entebbe and Kampala are sort of sister cities. We flew from Kampala back to Entebbe to Bunia, which is right over the border of the Congo, and then to Dungu.

**AS:** Once you arrive there how does the trip proceed?

**MW:** We took day trips out usually in the morning then another in the afternoon. We'd come back sometimes at noon and sometimes if we got too far out we'd just make the whole day in like five different directions. And then sometimes we would go back to the places where we saw most of the dogs. Problem being you would go in the morning and in the morning you would see people and dogs but after the people started going into the fields, the dogs would go with the people into the fields behind the huts and you would never see anybody around the huts. So the main times you would actually see people and animals would be in the morning or when it

was dinnertime after people returned from the fields. A lot of times you were going past places where the dogs are actually there but you can't see them. Therefore the prime time is morning and evening. We planned to take some day flights to different places like Daruma. That didn't materialize this year due to the fact that there was a lot of fighting from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in the places where we wanted to get to and some of the missionary planes were out on maintenance or otherwise unavailable.

**AS:** I would imagine that for the folks born and raised here in the USA, the trip presents a lot of unusual challenges. Can you describe some of the traveling and the daily routine for bathing and things like that?

**MW:** It was different for this trip from a couple of other trips that we've taken where we just rented a six-ton Mercedes truck and travelled through the Congo. We found a mission in Dungu where we worked from daily which gives you a roof over your head, a place to sleep and there are folks who cook for you. It cost us a bit of money daily for them to house us, but it made it somewhat easier than trips in the past. The first trip we had a hunting camp that no longer exists. The second trip we would get up in the morning; we would have to load the whole truck up and stop by 4 in the afternoon so we could unload the whole truck and set up





▲ Photo by Jon Curby



▲ Photo by Fritz Clark



▲ Photo by Fritz Clark



▲ Photo by Fritz Clark

▼ Photo by Jon Curby







## Congo Expeditions, Organized by Jon Curby

(Imports listed became foundation stock. Not all dogs imported became foundation stock.)

1987	1988	2006	2008	2011
<b>The Imports:</b> Avongara Bazingbi Avongara Gangura Avongara Goldi Avongara Zamee  <b>The Travelers:</b> Jon Curby and Michael Work	<b>The Imports:</b> Avongara Diagba Avongara Elly Avongara K'Posi Avongara M'Bliki Avongara Nabodio Avongara N'Gola Avongara N'Gondi Avongara Renzi Avongara Wele  <b>The Travelers:</b> Jon Curby, Damara Bolté and Stan Carter	<b>The Imports:</b> Avongara Bernadette, Avongara Ojo Avongara Luka Produced in utero: Avongara Rikita Avongara Zibili  <b>The Travelers:</b> Jon Curby, Michael Work, Tonda Curry, Joyce Moody and Anja Strietzel	<b>The Imports:</b> Avongara Angali Avongara Asuma Avongara Kitoko Avongara Tambura Avongara Ziki  <b>The Travelers:</b> Jon Curby, Tonda Curry, Mia & Lars Löwbeer and Erika Davis	<b>The Imports:</b> Puppies reported in this interview  <b>The Travelers:</b> Jon Curby, Michael Work, Ethel Blair, Katie Campbell, Fritz Clark, Carrie Lewis and Bev Reid
1990 - AKC Basenji Stud Book opened for a one time inclusion of 1987 and 1988 Imports			2009 - AKC Basenji Stud Book reopened from January 1, 2009 through December 31, 2013	

camp or find a mission or little town to live by. So in a lot of ways this was a little easier because we had a place to work out of.

**AS:** How do you choose where to search? How did you locate the place where you conducted the search? How did you decide on that?

**MW:** Originally we wanted to get as close to where Veronica Tudor-Williams went which was Northern Congo, Southern Sudan. When we went in the 1980s, you could not get a visa for the Sudan — at all. That was impossible. When Jon and I first went, we found a hunting outfit that worked in the Northern Congo, close to the Sudan. We came within 15 kilometers of the Sudan. Now that the Sudan has broken into two countries and Southern Sudan has their independence, it might be that in the future it will be possible to go to there.

In the Northern Congo what has happened is the Lord's Resistance Army, an army of militias, bandits and terrorists travel around and pillage, rape and kill people. The United Nations did the Ugandans a favor and drove the LRA out of Uganda. But what happened is they drove them into the Southern Sudan and the Northern Congo which is



2011 Travelers (L-R): Fritz Clark, Bev Reid, Katie Campbell, Ethel Blair, Jon Curby, Michael Work, Carrie Lewis  
(Photo by Fritz Clark)

more remote. Now the LRA hit and run. Even though the UN did a favor to Uganda, they didn't do a favor to the Congo and the Southern Sudan where we very much wanted to go. We chose the area we did because that was where Veronica went and where we felt the better dogs came from.

**AS:** Are there plans to go into the Sudan?

**MW:** We are hoping to do that. Southern Sudan's formal independence happens in June or July. We would have to see if we can get a visa then, see if we can get connections to do that and we would have to find out what was going on with the Lord's Resistance Army. We had no idea what the

size or makeup of the LRA was until we arrived in February. We didn't know if we were talking 300, 3000...

There was a gentleman from Belgium there studying that situation. He figured the Lord's Resistance Army numbered about 1000. The LRA actually hit one of the refugee camps north of Dungu the day after we left. They captured six people and the UN tracked them down and got the people back though I think a couple of them were shot. In Daruma, where we had wanted to go, there was an attack the day we had planned to get there and we didn't get there only because planes happened to be unavailable.

**AS:** Can you describe for us a little bit about how the negotiations work with the people who own these dogs. How do you get the dogs? Do they understand what it is that you want with them?

**MW:** First, we tell people we would like to see them and take pictures. Word gets around that we're interested in the dogs. Some think we are going to eat them or steal them so they're not as likely to let us see them. Some want to sell them to make money. Once we saw dogs, people understood we were in-



Photo by Fritz Clark



terested in buying some, so they negotiated with us. Some wanted outrageous fees; others would pretty much sell them for the price of a chicken.

**AS:** This trip, for the first time, you brought back a black and white puppy. We've heard there were a number of black and whites seen this time. Why do you think that is?

**MW:** I think part of the reason is it is just a matter of what you get when you breed a litter. I also think that part of the reason is because the Lord's Resistance Army is there. There are a lot of people moving around, moving out of areas into other areas who bring their dogs with them. The refugee camp north of Dungu seemed to have more black and whites and those people came from all different areas, most probably from Northwestern Congo. And they bring their dogs with them. This has been happening for a couple years so the gene pool has changed a bit in these areas. On our first trip, we only saw a couple black and whites. From the north I think a lot more dogs with that gene have traveled into the southern Congo or central Congo.

**AS:** You indicated that the mission was in a worse state than when you were there before. Can you talk about the mission?

**MW:** Yes, because of the LRA, there are more people coming from the outskirts of towns into the towns themselves for protection. The mission you might hope would be a sanctuary. Who is going to attack a mission? Yet two weeks before we got there, one of the sisters from the mission going from one

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town to the next was shot and killed. When we were there five years ago, the mission basically was only the sisters and the priest and was more like a mission. Now it is sort of an overrun mission where people work and people are coming through all the time. We all had our own room, but this time it wasn't nearly as formal.

**AS:** How had travel changed since the previous visits? In terms of the infrastructure, roads and all that, was it different than the previous times?

**MW:** The first time we went, we went to the capital, Kinshasa, which is in the south then flew north to a town call Isiro and then north to the hunting camp. Twenty-five years ago, there were paved roads in the Isiro squares — part of it was paved. There was mail service. Natives grew coffee. There were trucks available to go on the roads to buy the coffee which gave the Congolese something to do to help improve their local economies. Then when we went five years ago the mail service had disappeared because of war with Uganda. The roads had deteriorated. The bridges had deteriorated. There could be no mail service because the roads had become impassable. The country had deteriorated. They don't

sell coffee anymore because the trucks can't get through to get the coffee. There are big potholes. The roads have become so bad that it became necessary to dig around the old road through the jungle and cut a new road.

**AS:** What other changes did you notice?

**MW:** We saw more of a UN presence. We saw more food programs present. We only saw probably a dozen people that weren't native Congolese. You would get different people from different programs, Red Cross or what have you, trying to make a difference. But I think once you are there and you spend six months or a year, you see what you can actually do is very minimal. So I think it is depressing to a point that people don't stay. They leave.

**AS:** How many dogs did you folks bring back this time?

**MW:** We brought six dogs back this time.

**AS:** Puppies, adults or both?

**MW:** We brought back six puppies. We had tried to gauge when is the best time to go so that we could bring back young dogs that are say four months to six months, because then we could better see what we were going to get. It has always been difficult to bring older dogs back that have never had a leash on or that have never been in a crate. We found it much easier to bring puppies back. On the first trip we made it cost us \$100 to bring back a puppy. Now, by the time you get all the medical stuff done, all the shipping and all that, it costs close to \$700-\$1000 to bring





each puppy back. You can bring two puppies per crate. Because of how they would react, we would bring back younger dogs. This trip they weren't three months to six months. Most of the puppies we found were actually three weeks to twelve weeks. Some were so young that we were worried we weren't going to be able to get them back. One puppy had to stay in Kampala an extra two weeks and then we had it shipped back.

**AS:** How did the dogs you saw in general compare with the dogs you saw on previous visits? In terms of type and quality, were they significantly different?

**MW:** Not significantly different. In some cases, we found typier dogs in areas I wanted to get to that we were unable to get to on this trip. This is the incentive for me to go back — in order to try to get to those areas.

**AS:** I'm curious about how the process works about choosing the dogs. Do you go out to look at dogs, how many might you see at a time? How do you narrow it down? How many dogs do you look at?

**MW:** That is sort of a difficult question because you pull up to where there are three or four huts and there might be a couple of puppies and a mother or a litter. If the litter is too young, of course they're with the mother. But then you would hang around there and another dog would come wandering in from another hut or some more people would show up and then there would be five dogs there. That is what is exciting about it. You are sitting there and another one comes running down the road. Usually we would

see a couple of dogs and then maybe a litter. Probably, to answer the question though — how many dogs total did we see in a week? I'd say one hundred to one hundred fifty. We would travel out everyday to a different area.

**AS:** So would you go out and then look at dogs and go someplace else and then maybe make a decision to go back afterwards to pick dogs you had seen previously in a different area?

**MW:** Yes, absolutely. Because we didn't want to take the first thing we saw, so you would make a mental note of where there was something that you liked. And then sometimes you would go, well that looks a little young — I don't know if that is going to be a possibility. That would be a crashshoot too because you would tell the people that you were going to come back and then you come back and the people aren't there or the puppy is off somewhere or a particular dog is off somewhere. So we would make mental notes of where we wanted to go back, but if we saw something great we would take it right away. You would try to anticipate...are we going to come back this far? Are we going to come back this way? Like with the people with the tri puppy and the red puppy, we told them we would be back in two days. And we went back a couple of days later to get those.

**AS:** Did you have a set number of dogs in mind that you were going to bring back?

**MW:** No. Every time I go to the Congo, I would like to increase the quality. If I'm not increasing the quality or some other color,

then I don't have any reason to bring it back.

**AS:** In terms of the quality, would you say you saw better dogs this time or were they different in a particular way? How did they compare to the dogs you've seen on previous trips?

**MW:** I think they were as good. Better is hard to say because as you see they are still young so we don't know what they are going to grow up to be like. If I had been able to go where I wanted to in the Northern Congo, there they seem to have a stockier dog with a little bit chunkier body, a little bit curlier tail and a little bit more wrinkle. To some people's minds, the chunkier dog was going to be too chunky but it has more things that I think we need like more wrinkle and curlier tails. But we didn't get there.

**AS:** In the pictures that we saw of the refugee camps, we saw dogs. Were there lots of dogs in the refugee camps?

**MW:** There seemed to be, but the refugee camps were in turmoil. There were grass huts instead of clay huts. There were people on top of each other because when they got there they were afraid and wanted to be in a tighter band with more protection. When you get to an established community where there are clay huts, the dogs know where their people are. The dogs in the refugee camps are also in turmoil because they've all of a sudden been moved and don't know their surroundings or where their people are.

**AS:** As far as the dogs that were picked, how were the decisions made to pick them? Did



you make it as a group or did individuals feel strongly about wanting one particular dog? How were those decisions made?

**MW:** From all the trips we've done, it was pretty much a group decision but it had always been that Jon and I had the final say. But bringing new people, if they felt strongly about a particular dog, we were pretty easy to sway. Nobody is going to agree 100% all the time.

**AS:** So, did everyone on the trip keep a dog?

**MW:** No. Beverly and Jon did not, nor did Fritz. Katie brought three back and these were distributed. I brought three back, one went to Vermont, one went to Ohio and one is going to Australia.

**AS:** Tell us about the bells.

**MW:** I think over the years we've gotten most good bells in the Northern Congo. On this trip, we met a guy with older family members, refugees who had been moving around and he had really good quality bells.

We're finding a lot more wooden bells than the ones made from the nut seed. To me I like the nut bell. That tree is not available though in the southern Congo so most of the Southern Congo has wooden bells. I actually got a metal bell which Beverly found out was the kind of bell that they use on the dogs in Uganda on the basenjis that are there which we didn't know. We put it in with the wooden bells and said well I don't know what this is and brought it back — and then we found out later about its use in Uganda. I'll have to take a look at that bell again.

**AS:** You've been involved with basenjis since you were a little kid. You've had great success in the breed — you've won specialties and bests in shows and had top winning dogs. Where do you rank the trips to Africa in your basenji experiences?

**MW:** The trips to Africa are life altering, life changing experienc-



es. It is indescribable, like seeing pictures of the Grand Canyon and then going to see the Grand Canyon — two totally different things. You come back with a whole different perspective on life. You come back and you think about going to Macy's to get a shirt and you say I don't need another shirt. The people there have one shirt. I have a closet full of shirts. Why do I need a closet full of shirts?

The dog show success has been a great thing, don't get me wrong. But each time I go to Africa it is beyond expectations, beyond words. You can get a better idea when you look at pictures or video perhaps. We spent one afternoon in a church and they got all the kids together and they did an hour's concert for us playing the drums and singing. It gives you just a whole different perspective on what's important. That show ribbon is important. But being in Africa is about people and lifestyle and dogs. For anyone who can possibly do this and wants to do this — you should.

## MOVING?

### ✧ CHANGE OF ADDRESS NOTICE ✧

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