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Ray Howell
Outdoor Life's 2007 Most
Influential Sportsman of the Year

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Ray Howell Kickin Bear One-on-One

"At 18 yards, Ray launched an arrow. As the arrow sliced through the bear it spun and charged."

Ray Howell's bow hunting adventures in pursuit of the North American Super Slam have made him a popular feature in outdoor magazines and on television shows, such as "American Archer" and Gander Mountain's "We Live Outdoors". Ray, however, insists his greatest adventures in life are his constant

powerlifting, a sport he began as a youth. He won many national power-lifting titles and set many national records, all drug free. Seemingly, he had it all. One day, Tom Poulkey came by to tell Ray about a troubled kid who, like him years earlier, needed help. Soon Ray found himself helping more and more kids.

With a new purpose in life the ministry of Kicking Bear was born. The name, Kicking Bear, was inspired by a grizzly bear hunt in Alaska. Ray and his guide, Ron Sherer, followed a huge set of tracks to a monstrous bear. At 18 yards, Ray launched an arrow. As the arrow sliced through the bear it spun



pursuit of a closer relationship with God and the never-ending quest to reach kids with hope of Jesus Christ. Kicking Bear Camps, founded by Ray, reach out to underprivileged, hurt, and neglected children using archery and the outdoors as a platform for the message of hope that Ray has been called to share.

Born in Michigan, Ray was raised in Wisconsin. The product of a broken home, he was completely devastated the day his father walked out on his family. Five-year old Ray had to be pulled from the backseat of his father's car kicking and screaming.

Ray lived with his grandparents. His grandfather taught him about welding and the value of hard work, however, his true passion, archery, was learned largely on his own. After his grandfather became ill Ray and his brothers were sent to foster homes and he began to get into trouble. He ran away from five different homes. Tom Poulkey, his social worker, would track him down and take him back. One day while Ray sat in a local jail cell, Tom saw him reading some hunting magazines. Tom offered to take Ray hunting with him and his family. It was this introduction to the outdoors that made Ray focus on what he wanted to do with his life. Ray also learned the difference one man could make in the life of a kid while using the outdoors as a classroom.

Ray eventually married and opened a welding shop. The business prospered, as did his success in the field of

One troubled young man, Ben Ring, asked Ray to take him hunting. It was this encounter that motivated Ray to begin Kicking Bear; he just did not know it yet. God was still not a priority for Ray.

Ray's wife, Karen, had been attending church and became concerned for Ray's salvation. Karen confided in a man named Pat Aucoin, a strong believer, and fellow hunter. For two hours one day Pat explained to Ray about what it meant to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and that life would never be totally fulfilling until he had that relationship. Ray listened but made no commitment. One day soon after, while practicing with his bow, it all suddenly made sense.

"There was an overwhelming burning in my heart--so overwhelming that I went to my knees. I realized with my bow in one hand and arrows in the other that the Lord had been the one who had been guiding my arrows long before I knew who He was, and He is the one who has given me all of my abilities. I also realized that these abilities were given to me for a purpose and that purpose is my calling here on earth. He is the one who has opened all the doors for His purpose. At that moment, that's when I let Jesus into my heart and knew that there was no other path to follow here on earth".

and charged. The bear slid to a dead stop (literally) under his feet. Neither Ray nor his guide could believe what happened. Ron looked at him and said, "You really kicked that bear's hind end!" An American Indian and lore enthusiast, he told Ray that his Indian name would be "Kicking Bear". This name would come to identify Ray's passion for reaching kids.

Ray began using whatever platform he could to reach kids and motivate adults to mentor young people, including his infamous Polar Bear hunt. Ray says of this opportunity,

"This was an incredible hunt for me. Every day I got to wake up, take my bow into a hostile environment and chase my dream. Every day, using a satellite phone I posted my progress on a website and then took a minute and talked about the importance of being a mentor to a kid and how you can change a kid's life by spending just a little time with him or her in the outdoors".

On the 14th day Ray harvested a magnificent bear with his bow.

Since the first camp, interest has grown and camps are being held in many states with more asking to sponsor camps each year. These camps are totally free to all participants. Thousands of kids throughout the US are attending accompanied by adult mentors to insure the child does not get lost after the camp experience. Games, outdoor education, and of course archery all are part of the

Kicking Bear experience along with an organized group youth hunt to follow each individual camp. However, Ray always makes sure that during the course of the weekend he shares with the kids the real reason behind Kicking Bear. He challenges the kids to pursue their dreams as he did and that a relationship with Jesus Christ is key to any successful life pursuit. Thousands of kids have now found faith in Christ through Kicking Bear.

In about 2002 Gander Mountain stores signed on with Ray Howell and Kicking Bear. When he received the call from company CEO Mark Baker to talk about a Pro-Staff position, Ray took along a 2" thick resume of all the boyhood dreams he had chased in the outdoors. Ray was also very clear in the meeting as to what the message of Ray Howell and Kicking Bear was all about. He unashamedly told Mark about that message and instead of shying away Mark enthusiastically embraced Ray's mission. Ray didn't even open his resume. Instead, all he and Mark talked about was how they could help kids together. Kicking Bear has become a prominent theme with the outdoor retailer.

In 2005 Ray joined forces with BowTech Archery and their subsidiary Diamond Bows to support the mission of Kicking Bear. BowTech and Diamond have developed a huge following of hunters on account of their product quality and innovation and their exposure in the hunting and outdoor industry has led to a relationship that is especially exciting. John Strasheim, CEO of BowTech and Dewayne Tiller, General Manager have made it perfectly clear in a statement to Ray that it does not matter how many youth bows they sell but rather how many people find a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. At that point, Ray knew why he was there and who his new "fishing" partners were. When one walks past the BowTech and Diamond booth at any of the industry trade shows one of the first things noticed is the prominently displayed Kicking Bear logo. The Diamond Cutter and Edge are now the official bows of Kicking Bear.

Most recently, Realtree has joined forces with Kicking Bear as a major sponsor and contributor in Ray's quest to reach as many kids as possible through archery and the outdoors.

Since finding faith in Christ Ray's life has only gotten better. His tumultuous childhood, once filled with heartache and discontent, has helped him to better appreciate all that God has done for him. Ray forgave his father for leaving when he was a child and made peace with him. God allowed Ray the opportunity to follow his boyhood dreams of bowhunting big game. Ray says his greatest sponsor in life is his wife Karen and that his love for her continues to grow. In his words, "It's been like the mountains I have climbed—when you think you've made it to the top—it's only another level and as the love grows, you're only looking up to what you think might be the top. She has been my "all in life." She truly is a gift from God." With a family of nine children and 25 grandchildren, Ray and Karen's "quiver is full" and is a testament to their love for kids and commitment to family, something missed by Ray as a child.

He has now nearly completed the Super Slam (that is all of the 28 recognized North American big game animals each of which must qualify for Pope & Young). In 2006 Pope & Young recognized him with the Stewardship Award on account of all he has given back to young people and the sport of archery. In 2007, Outdoor Life named Ray one of the 25 most influential sportsmen of the year. Over 10,000 people voted on the Outdoor Life website and in the end Ray was selected as single most influential sportsman of the year. Ray received the inaugural award at the SHOT Show in February. Ray says that nothing he's done in life, no amount of money he's made, record broken, award received, or trophy taken compares to spending even just five minutes helping a kid. Ray says, "There is only one Pro-Staff in life—and that involves being an ambassador for Christ".

Statistically, sociologists would tell us that Ray Howell did not stand a chance as a kid, but since when was God concerned about statistics? God



had a plan for him though that plan was not revealed until later in life. Jeremiah 29:11 reads, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (NIV). Who would have thought that God's plan for thousands of young people would involve a former foster kid, juvenile delinquent, welder, weightlifter, and world-class bowhunter? God's hand has certainly been on the life of Ray Howell, even when he did not realize it. Today God is using him, Kicking Bear,

and partners like Gander Mountain and BowTech Archery to encourage kids, many of whom would otherwise have no hope or future here on earth, to follow their dreams and trust in the Lord, and build for them a hope and future for eternity.

For more information about Ray Howell and Kicking Bear go to www.RayHowell.com or www.KickingBear.org.

In August, I attended a Kicking Bear Camp in Michigan. 340 kids, many from inner city Detroit arrived at the campground on Friday night amid pouring rain and thunderstorms. Despite the conditions their excitement could not be extinguished. It was incredible to watch and participate in the many events Friday night, to include what had to be the world's largest marshmallow fight. There is no way to describe seeing 20,000 marshmallows being thrown; you just have to see it!

Saturday brought more rain but shining spirits. First breakfast, a safety brief, and then it was off to the 3-D archery ranges with the campers. It was a chance to bond with smaller groups of kids. I met a boy whose mother recently died. I met an 8-year old girl who earlier in the summer had been hit twice by bullets in a drive-by shooting. Behind the smiling faces, there was a lot of hurt.

At the end of the day everyone gathered around to listen to Ray and retired Detroit Lions lineman Tony Semple speak. Ray shared the exciting story of David and Goliath and how nothing is impossible if God is on your side. In the end, the Gospel was presented. Heads were bowed, eyes closed. Kids prayed. Lives changed. To think it all began with a boy, a bow, and a bear!



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