

D-lineman plays football but has a passion for hunting and fishing

INDIANAPOLIS - When Indianapolis Colts Defensive Lineman Ellis Johnson came to Indianapolis from Florida, he looked for somewhere to live; then he looked for somewhere to hunt. He found a home on the northside, and with the Dirty Dozen Hunting and Fishing Club.

The Dirty Dozen was established in 1980 by a small group of black die-hard outdoorsmen like Johnson, who wanted a place for other enthusiasts to meet and swap hunting and fishing tales.

But over the years, the once-small outdoors club, has grown to include some noteworthy members, It's also acquired a building at 39th and Keystone, that is almost too nice by hunt club standards.

Business Manager Joe King says their facility is still a work in progress, and has big plans. "We already have a conference room for meetings, an exercise room to get in shape for mountain hunting trips and video equipment for previewing educational hunting and fishing videos."

Work has also begun on a large room that will closely simulate the outdoors and allow for educational seminars, like how to hunt and fish, and gun safety.

According to King, there is an untapped need for this sort of facility, especially in its urban setting.

"Where ever you go throughout the inner city of Indianapolis, there are usually kids just wandering the streets with nothing to do, and nowhere to go. There aren't even any community centers in our area. We would like to provide a an option for those kids who want to learn to fish and hunt," King said.

To that end, The Dirty Dozen organizes a Fall Creek clean up every spring in an effort to meet neighborhood kids. The event is sponsored by several local corporations

Although the club was formed by minorities and aggressively pursues kids with an itch to go fishing, membership is open to individuals of all ages from any ethnic background.

"We did turn down public funds once because that would have required us to keep our doors open to anyone who walked in off the street. We want to maintain a club that the city can be proud of, and whose mission is always grounded in hunting and fishing. We have to make sure all members share our same values and love of the outdoors," King revealed.

Future plans for the club's facility include indoor shooting and archery ranges.

Club members also plan annual exotic hunting and fishing trips. Past destinations have included Mexico, Alaska and the Rocky Mountains.

Recognizable Members

Not all of the club's outings are to distant locales. Because hunting season falls during football season, club members and Indianapolis Colts linemen Johnson and Waverly Jackson confine their excursions to the Hoosier State.

Such was the case recently when both men agreed to an early morning duck hunt along the White River in Owen County.

Despite the physical punishment the two men had endured on the previous Sunday, both exited their 4x4 truck onto a predawn flooded cornfield with enthusiasm and focus on the task at hand.

Being newly introduced to hunting by Johnson, Jackson said little, content to follow Johnson's lead. Johnson, who would like to be a professional fisherman when he retires from football, was much more open with his emotions.

"I live for hunting and fishing. If there was a way to live out here, I'd do it. Let's go find some ducks," he said in an anticipatory voice.

As the rain started to fall, and he looked through the headlights at the mile of swamp and mud that had to be traversed, Jackson was not as excited.

But after an hour of hiking, positioning and repositioning, and a quick review on the differences between a feeding and hail call, Jackson settled in.

"I would love to see some ducks this morning, but I came out this morning for the same reason I joined The Dirty Dozen - to create new and lasting friendships," Jackson said.

That was a good thing because very few ducks flew that day, and even fewer made it to the game bag. But that was OK with Johnson, too.

"I joined the club to meet other people who love the outdoors as much as I do. Some of the most enduring bonds I have in my life are with people I have befriended in outdoor circles," Johnson said.

Johnson attributes most of his current passion for hunting and fishing to his childhood when his grandparents and a local police officer used to take him afield with them regularly.

The Dirty Dozen has the sort of membership, facility and message to similarly influence inner city Indianapolis kids to choose the outdoors over less desirable activities, he said.

The Dirty Dozen Hunting and Fishing Club meets the first Sunday of every month at their facility on 39th Street. Individuals or corporations interested in joining or sponsoring the club can call Joe King at (317) 541-0721.