

Posted February 2, 2012

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Howell Woody ready to make Groundhog Day prediction

By Christopher Behnan

Livingston County Daily Press & Argus

HOWELL, Mich. (AP) -- Woody the woodchuck has walked around with a little added swagger in the aftermath of Punxsutawney Phil's disastrous, incorrect weather prediction last winter.

Woody, Livingston County's own weather prognosticator, got it right -- six more weeks of winter remained.

On Thursday morning -- Groundhog Day -- Woody will again predict how much winter remains from her exclusive Howell Conference and Nature Center residence.

She'll attempt a 10th correct prediction in 14 years.

"She's a little bit of a prima donna, but you can just tell that there's this aura around her that she has gained again, gained that self-confidence," said Dick Grant, executive director of the nature center in Marion Township.

"Woody understands that she's really the No. 1 prognosticator of the land. She just never got over how Phil messed it up last year," Grant added.

Woody will make her prediction at 8:15 a.m. sharp Thursday -- regardless of the weather -- outside her nature center home.

This year, visitors will hear Woody's prediction among the center's new gardens and a 30-foot tree sculpture integrated with Woody's wooden home.

Michigan can expect to endure six more weeks of winter if Woody sees her shadow and crawls back into her den. If she doesn't see her shadow, the Great Lakes State is in for an early spring.

"How often is Phil's prediction correct? 100 percent of the time, of course!" reads the Punxsutawney Groundhog Club's official website.

Clearly not so, as seen in last year's embarrassing gaffe in Pennsylvania.

Also false are claims of near-perfect or perfect records by other so-called prognosticators -- including General Beau Lee in Georgia, Woodstock Willie in Illinois and Staten Island Chuck, Grant said.

Outside of Phil, Woody doesn't recognize any of her competitors, which are mere "upstarts" in the prognostication game, he added.

Woody became particularly cocky when she learned Phil, out of sheer embarrassment at last year's failure, didn't emerge from winter hibernation until July, Grant said.

He said Phil is accurate about 50 percent of the time and that his ongoing claims of a perfect record demonstrate "acts of a desperate groundhog."

"So it's just like flipping the coin with Phil. Woody has been much more accurate," Grant said.

"Maybe after 126 years, Phil has seen his better day, perhaps," he added.

But nobody's perfect, and even Woody in recent years struggled to get back to the top of her game after two consecutive incorrect predictions.

She's been correct the past three years, however.

With the misfortune of her archrival and a new winning streak, Woody is back on top and has "gotten that mojo back," Grant said.

Thursday's free celebration will begin at 7:45 a.m., and will include a "crazy outfit" contest for children. Contestants are encouraged to brave the elements in their favorite summer clothing.

The winner will win one free week at the center's summer camp.

A free continental breakfast will be served.

Published: Thu, Feb 2, 2012

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