

In Hot Pursuit

BY MARK LLEWELLYN

Autumn hues—yellows, oranges, reds and browns—create a perfect backdrop for the ceremony transpiring on this crisp early November morning. The opening day of foxhunting season has arrived and horses, hounds and hunters alike are eager to commence the chase. All is quiet except for the hounds milling amongst the scarlet-clad foxhunters, dried leaves crackling under paws. The bishop, cloaked in a long white robe, offers the “blessing of the hounds,” a fourfold benediction which sanctifies not only the hounds but also the horses, the hunters and the fox. Each member of the hunt is then individually presented with a medallion depicting a stag with a crucifix between its antlers, the representation of Saint Hubert of Liege, the patron saint of hunting. With this formality completed, riders mount and begin the business of the day.

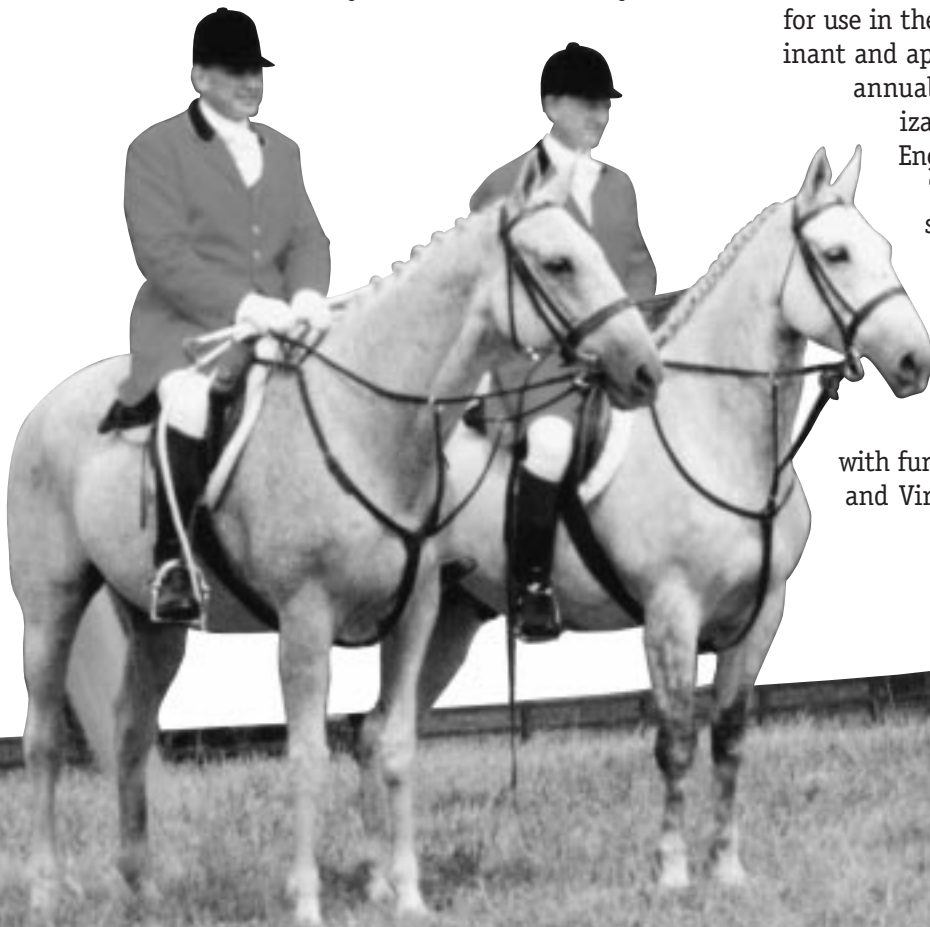
Foxhunting was originally practiced out of necessity rather than sport. Due to agricultural practices of the era, fox were able to prey efficiently and indiscriminately on free

range poultry and lambs. As economic damages mounted, farmers began to hunt foxes. In time gentry began participating in the sport and hunting became recognized as an effective way of managing the fox population, thus curtailing livestock losses.

Steeped in formality and tradition, foxhunting has fascinated sportsmen for several centuries. King Edward II of England published accounts of foxhunting as early as 1420, but increased popularity of the sport coincided with a wane of interest in falconry in the 1600s. The first organized foxhunts occurred in the seventeenth century. As the sport drew more participants, land use laws were imposed to boost fox numbers and to enable the hunt. Foxhunting remains a tradition in present-day England. Deeply ingrained in rural life, the sport brings together rural communities at point-to-point races, hunt balls, terrier races and horse trials. Over 200,000 people ride to the hounds in England. English foxhunters breed standard foxhounds, fell foxhounds, beagles, harriers, basset hounds, mink hounds and deer hounds for use in the field. However, foxhounds are predominant and approximately 185 recognized packs hunt annually. Despite amalgamations and urbanization, there are more packs of hounds in England today than in 1900.

The roots of North American foxhunting sprouted in 1650 when Robert Brooke imported English foxhounds to Charles County, Maryland. By the early 1700s, the popularity of foxhunting was escalating. In 1742, Thomas Walker of Albemarle County, Virginia augmented colonial foxhound bloodlines with further English imports. Although Maryland and Virginia can be considered collectively as

Photo by Norman Drake



the mecca of colonial foxhunting, interest in the sport in other colonies arose. Sparked by the demand for alternate hound bloodlines, George Washington, an avid foxhunter who established a private pack first in 1767 and then again after the Revolutionary War, sought the importation of French hounds in the late 1700s. In 1785, Washington received his wares from Lafayette, hounds with voices "like the bells of Moscow." The importations of Brooke, Walker and Washington formed the foundation lineage of hounds hunting the countryside in present-day Virginia and surrounding states.

Thomas, Sixth Lord Fairfax, assembled the first collection of hounds and maintained this collection for a group of foxhunting enthusiasts rather than an individual hunter. Thomas and his entourage traversed the peaks and valleys of the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia. This area of Virginia is home to the Piedmont Hounds, organized in 1840 and considered the first established foxhound club in the United States. Today, more than 175 North American hunts provide members and guests the sights and sounds distinctive of foxhunting - hounds with noses to the ground casting for a scent, hunting horn bellowing its single note in different tones and rhythms, hunt members clad in white stocks and scarlet coats, and the echos of hounds in full cry resounding through ravines.

The onset of foxhunting season usually begins in late August or early September after crops are harvested. The season comes to a close as landowners begin preparing the earth for crop production in the spring. Foxhunting country is diverse and may include meadows, cornfields, forests, fields and marshes. Prior to the official opening of the season, "cubbing season" occurs. For several weeks, first season hounds, known as young entry, are taken to the field in the early morning to amass experience and to disperse fox cubs over the countryside. Hounds are not kept in the field for extended periods of time during cubbing season as the huntsman wants only to ensure the hounds are tracking the proper game. Because cubbing season is less formal in nature, members of the hunt are often invited to ride green mounts through the country so the horses can become acquainted with the hunting environment.

Without question, the most integral part of any fox

hunt is the quarry. Only eight to twelve pounds at maturity, the bright russet and black red foxes typically occupy a territory with a radius of two to three miles. Foxes lead solitary lives and generally seek the company of other foxes only during the mating season. Fiercely territorial, a fox will strongly discourage other foxes from interloping on its territory. If food or water become scarce in its territory, a fox may broaden its hunting ground. As a fox becomes accustomed to a greater expanse of land, it may run further and induce greater sport for the foxhunters. Often, land which is hunted frequently will have a larger concentration of foxes than areas not flushed regularly.

The red fox is cunning and undeniably artful in its evasion tactics. Fleeing is only one of innumerable tricks the fox uses to escape hounds. Foxes will frequently journey over terrain which does not absorb scent, including stream beds, asphalt roads, patches of wild mint, fields covered with fresh manure or fertilizer, and wooded areas blanketed with leaves which are uplifted effortlessly and regularly by the wind. Innate wiliness also beckons foxes to slink over obstacles unnegotiable to hounds such as stone walls, rail fences and thin ice.

Grey foxes also provide sport to foxhunters. Grey foxes tend to run shorter distances and double back more quickly than red foxes, which generates less excitement for the hunters. In addition, grey foxes are skill-

ful climbers and hounds will often tree a grey fox, thereby ending the run. Although the scent of the grey fox is not as strong as that of the red fox, hounds have few problems tracing the scent.

Legions of foxhunting enthusiasts believe the foxes enjoy the excitement of the chase as much as the hounds and hunters. Some foxes seem to arrogantly badger the hounds by reverting and circling past dens when they could have easily gone to earth. More than one courageous fox has chosen a direct route to a destination and has scampered through a pack of hounds unscathed. In the United States, the emphasis on foxhunting is on the chase rather than the kill. While foxhunts do end in a kill occasionally in the United States, this is certainly the exception rather than the rule. Due to natural selection, fox populations are extremely healthy. Because Maryland,



Theodore Kjellstrom calling the hounds for the Wayne-DuPage Hunt Club.

Photo submitted by Anna Kjellstrom

Virginia, Pennsylvania and Delaware have landscape and countryside very similar to that in England, foxes are plentiful. In addition, the stone-laden fields and deciduous forests of New England are home to an abundance of foxes.

The coyote is also capable of producing a thrilling hunt. Although it will typically canvass a larger hunting area, a coyote may run a fox-like pattern, winding and unpredictable, in its established territory. Because coyotes are not as instinctively territorial as foxes, they may run in straight lines, especially in newly acquired territory, which may cause hounds to leave prescribed hunting areas. While coyotes are larger, stronger and can boast greater endurance than foxes, coyote hunting is more popular in the western and southern United States. However, coyotes are adaptable and have migrated east into traditional fox-hunting states such as Maryland and Delaware.

In areas where fox, coyote or other game is scarce, a drag hunt will be held. Drag hunting dates to the early 1600s and the reign of King James I of England. Prior to a drag hunt, a scent will be skimmed over the countryside by an experienced member of the hunt. Laying a drag is an art and the individual responsible for laying the scent will often consider the natural reactions of a fox as changes in terrain and obstacles are encountered. Some hunts in the United States and Canada are exclusively drag hunts. Because the course of the hunt can be predicted, the integrity of farmlands can be preserved and potential hazards can be avoided. The hounds will capture this scent and the chase will unfold as if live quarry were being pursued.

Throughout a traditional hunt, stretches of galloping are often interrupted by natural and manmade fences. Stone walls, post and rail fences, ditches, creeks, fallen trees and a myriad of other obstacles may be negotiated during a hunt. For the less audacious equestrian, alternate routes, usually through gates or around obstacles, are more inviting avenues. When hounds catch scent of a fox and the fox leaves cover in favor of open country, the fox is said to have "gone away." The chase begins when the hounds uncover a scent. Hounds will remain in pursuit until they lose a scent due to a change in terrain or weather conditions or through the evasiveness of the fox. Such a forced stop is considered a "check." If a check occurs, the huntsman will often "lift" or gather the hounds, move to another covert and recast the pack (signal hounds to look for a scent). A pursuit will also end abruptly if the fox "goes to earth," or finds sanctuary in a den or earthen hole.

Members of the hunt conform to a strict hierarchy while in the field. Protocol is obeyed exactly and breaches of etiquette are frowned upon. The hounds lead the group and they are followed closely by the huntsman and the whippers-in. The Master of Foxhounds and the field master, if present, lead the remainder of the field. The huntsman carries the hunting horn and controls the

hounds in the field. Acting as extensions of the huntsman, whippers-in prevent hounds from becoming too scattered and reel in hounds which encroach on roadways or lands not open to hunting. The Master of Foxhounds holds the highest position in a hunt. One of the primary responsibilities of the Master of Foxhounds is to oversee the care, handling and breeding of the hounds. In addition, the Master schedules the locations of the hunts and nurtures relationships with landowners who allow the hunt to trek over their land. The Master also appoints the individuals who will work for the hunt. One position the Master may appoint is the field master. This individual leads the field if the Master of Foxhounds chooses not to. The field master keeps the field riders close enough to the hounds to enjoy

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the action but far enough away so as not to disrupt the hounds. The field is ordered as well with the most experienced foxhunters closer to the front and children near the back. Riders who follow slowly in the rear of the group are sometimes called hilltoppers. Some hilltoppers follow the hunt in cars along roads. Members may invite guests to a foxhunt, but typically a capping fee is assessed and members are expected to ride with their guests. The term "capping" originated from the practice of collecting the fee in the hunting cap of a field member or servant.

Many foxhunting conventions are universal and any gaffe in protocol is considered taboo. For instance, hounds have the right of way over horses at all times and riders should avoid placing hounds in potentially dangerous situations. Riders should always be respectful of staff members during the hunt and no member of the field should pass the field master or the Master of Foxhounds. Members of the field may be excused from the hunt or hilltoppers may join the field with approval from the field master, although this is usually done during a check so minimal disruption of the hunt occurs. All members of the hunt generally remain silent or speak only when necessary so the huntsman and whippers-in can maintain communication with the hounds.

The uncompromising decorum of foxhunting extends to the attire worn by members of the hunt. During the less formal cubbing season, members may wear ratcatcher, which refers to a mute-colored tweed coat, tan or brown breeches or jodphurs, and a stock, neckband or neatly tied bow. A hunt cap, bowler or safety helmet is also worn. If weather conditions warrant, variation in ratcatcher is acceptable.

Upon commencement of the regular hunting season, formal hunting attire, or the livery of a hunt, is typically required. Differences in dress do exist; however, there are a few consistencies regardless of rank. A plain white stock is the traditional neckwear for all individuals riding to hounds. The stock should be fastened with a horizontally placed pin. In addition, top hats and bowlers can be replaced with safety helmets with properly fastened chin straps.

The Master of Foxhounds, whether a lady or a gentleman, will traditionally wear a scarlet square-cornered, single-breasted frock coat called a pink coat, white or tan heavy cord breeches and well polished black calf boots with brown tops. A black velvet hunt cap with the silk ribbons down and brown leather or string gloves are also standard. A hunting crop complete with thong and lash, a hunting horn carried between the buttons of the coat or in a leather case attached to either side of the saddle, wire cutters, and a flask and sandwich case are also conventional accoutrements.

Gentleman members of the hunt may wear a scarlet coat with rounded corners, a black frock coat or a black hunting coat. A top hat is worn with a scarlet coat and a bowler hat is worn with a black coat. Plain black calf boots with plain tops are typical. Lady members riding astride may wear a dark blue, gray or black hunting coat, plain white hunting stock with horizontally placed safety pin, buff breeches and black calf boots with optional patent leather tops. A bowler or silk hunting hat have been traditionally worn. Gloves, sandwich case (or combination flask and sandwich case), spurs and a light hunting crop with thong are appropriate. Although seen rarely in the field today, ladies riding sidesaddle must wear dark melton habits. A top hat is worn with a double breasted dress hunting coat and a veil must be worn with a top hat. A bowler is worn with plain jackets.

Hunting regalia is designed with practicality in mind. Melton coats are not only designed for warmth during the

cold hunting months but are also water resistant. Breeches of sturdy construction and leather boots offer protection against briars, brambles and branches. The stock tie, fastened with a large gold safety pin, can serve as a bandage or sling should a rider, horse or hound sustain an injury. Each hunt typically possesses its own distinctive colors and bestows these colors to regular members. These colors are often worn on the collar. Buttons portraying the hunt insignia are often worn by ladies and gentlemen of the hunt.

Suitable foxhunting mounts must be sound, well-mannered and athletic horses or ponies. Any breed or type of horse may be used, but stamina and natural prowess over fences are prime considerations when selecting a foxhunter. Ill-mannered horses garner little respect in the hunt field and a horse prone to kicking may don a red ribbon in its tail and is usually relegated to the rear of the hunt.

Rich in tradition and pageantry, the centuries-old sport of foxhunting is thriving in the United States and abroad. As long as individuals continue to appreciate the hounds at work and the thrill of chasing quarry, foxhunting will endure as a favorite equestrian pastime.

With less spring in their stride and less anticipation in their eyes, the horses trudge on loose rein towards the stone clubhouse and kennels. In front of the field, the

hounds trot ahead with tongues hanging limply from their mouths, the only sign of fatigue after a long day of successful hunting. As the foxhunters dismount, the prickling stings of cold feet hitting unyielding ground become reality. Riders untack and cool their mounts and tuck them away in straw-bedded stalls for a well-deserved respite. Then, the foxhunters shed melton coats and enjoy recounting tales of the day's adventures over breakfast and beverages. Invisibly linked by a passion for the outdoors, animals and the sport, a sense of fellowship envelops all foxhunters and each eagerly awaits the next outing. ∞



Master of Foxhounds Jerry Miller heading home at the end of the day.

Photo by Norman Dale