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THE CHANGING LOOK OF FOX HUNTING

Mounting costs, fewer "angels" and the hazards of deer and housing developments are bringing a good many changes to a flourishing but misunderstood sport that carries on a great never-say-die tradition

By **Reginald Wells**

Ever since the sport was brought to America in Colonial days, fox hunting has had its troubles. It was just about 100 years ago that sportsmen and the public in general first sounded the death knell of fox hunting. The skeptics reasoned that such a rural pursuit as fox hunting could never survive in an age of industrial revolution with its railroads, automobiles and barbed wire. Today the death knell is still tolling, and with about as much effect. Too many deer are running riot with hounds; housing developments are gobbling up precious hunting country; parkways and thruways are a constant menace to the packs, and taxes have reduced to a handful the number of people who can afford to foot the bill of a private establishment. But in spite of these setbacks there are still some 200,000 persons in this country happily engaged in some form of fox hunting. Most of them enjoy "night hunting" on foot in mountainous or wooded country unsuitable for riding. The rest—about 3,000 every weekend—ride to hounds mounted in the English tradition.

It is this mounted form which faces a simple decision today—change or die out. It is a decision that fox hunters have faced for decades and they're still going strong in spite of it. In the matter of adaptability the fox hunter is a past master. Overtaken by sprawling suburbs, the hunts near cities are moving off to new country. To replace the angels who formerly financed most of the sport, hunt clubs are being formed in which all members share the costs. With an eye to the future, pony clubs are being encouraged for young riders.

Along with its other hazards, fox hunting constantly has to wage a war of enlightenment with landowners and the public. Most attacks on fox hunting are based on ignorance, and of all the sports in America it is the most misunderstood.

Educating the public to the qualities of fox hunting is part of the dedicated purpose of the Master of Foxhounds Association to which all of the nation's 107 recognized packs belong. Because the leisured young gentleman of means is almost a thing of the past, fewer young men are seen today in the hunting field. Young women are taking to the sport in increasing numbers and now outnumber the men about 10 to 1. While most hunts try to keep up appearances and turn out as well as they can, the worth of a fox hunter is not judged by his clothes but how well he rides to hounds.

The Meadow Brook Hunt on Long Island is typical of the hunts which today face many obstacles, and no hunt illustrates better their ability to overcome them.

At one time the Meadow Brook met as far west as Jamaica—now a subway terminal set in the midst of close-packed stores, filling stations and houses. For years the Meadow Brook hunting country has been shrinking at the edges and today all that remains is several strips of landed estates riddled with parkways and intersected by solid lines of speeding cars. And some of these are being slowly eaten up by housing developments.

Although the wise people have shaken their heads at the start of every new season and prophesied that this would be Meadow Brook's last, the hunt is still going strong and not even the Jericho turnpike and Route 25A, which run right through their country, have dampened the spirits of its members or lessened sport—they've just made it harder. At least one hound is killed on these roads every year and others are often hit and injured. Veterinary bills have increased, and public relations are constantly strained. One driver whose car hit a hound sent the hunt a bill for a dented fender—and collected!

CHASED BY GUNNERS

With the influx of new residents who are not geared to pleasant thoughts about horses, a difficult landowner problem has arisen. Like other hunts the Meadow Brook is constantly being misunderstood. When hounds ran a fox into the cellar of a stolid-looking development house—after what must be conceded was an excellent chase—all kinds of unappreciative people objected. Properties were promptly posted against riders; the local sale of barbed wire increased and on one occasion the hunt was chased by some gunners. Complaints started to pour in that "the horses are frightening the children." Patiently and with the resolution of spirit inherent in fox hunters the members of the Meadow Brook have handled these problems, and if all are not yet solved at least the hunt continues to go out twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Under its Joint Masters, Mr. Charles V. Hickox and Mr. William F. Dobbs, assisted by their professional huntsman, Charles D. Plumb, the Meadow Brook carries on in the best tradition of the sport.

If and when it has to close down, its members will go somewhere else to hunt—but stop hunting they will not. Such is the fox hunters' love for their sport that no hazard or distance seems too great to prevent them from getting out and riding to hounds. An example of this is Mr. Tim Durant, Master of the Smithtown Hunt, who commutes by commercial plane from Danbury, Conn, to his hunt in Long Island every weekend, thereby avoiding a seven-hour drive by car.

Although the present trend is towards rural hunts, the majority are still supported by people who commute to and from a large city. More people are hunting today than ever before—but they hunt fewer days a week. Most hunt only one day a week.

No two fox hunters can agree on which is the best hunt in the

Based on the numbers hunting, however, the following hunts are among the best: in Pennsylvania, Mr. Stewart's Cheshire Fox Hounds; in Virginia, the Piedmont, Orange County, Warrenton and Middleburg; in Maryland, the Elkridge-Harford and the Green Spring Valley; in New Jersey, the Essex; in New York, The Genesee Valley and the Millbrook; in Connecticut, Fairfield County and the Litchfield. In the Carolinas, Moore County and the Sedgefield; in Ohio, the Camargo; in Illinois, Oak Brook; in Missouri, the Bridlespur; in Colorado, the Arapahoe; in Canada, the Montreal and the Toronto and North York.

There are approximately 53 packs of hounds which might be described as club packs, supported by dues and subscriptions, 27 hunt packs supported by hunt subscriptions, and 28 private packs supported by their masters, with contributions from landowners, the field and capping fees (a courtesy fee for the privilege of hunting).

The sport of the 107 hunts is predominantly live, native fox, but 22 practice drag hunting (hounds follow a scent laid down by dragging a bag of fox excrement or aniseed); 16 hunt both fox and drag; two hunt both fox and coyote, and one both fox and hare. The fox-hunting hound population of America is something over 5,300 couple (10,600 hounds) in a typical year. Frequently two or three breeds are kenneled but crossbreds, at more than 3,800 couple, predominate. American hounds number over 1,250 couple and English foxhounds 261 couple.

One measure of a hunt's status is how many times hounds go out. Fifty to 70 times a season (Sept.-April in most hunts) is about average. Hounds in Southern states are likely to enjoy more huntable weather; the Tryon Hounds in North Carolina went out 145 times last season. Permission for a stranger or visitor to

For those who have never taken part, the pleasures of a fox hunt are often hard to comprehend. Although many follow in cars, and some on foot, fox hunting is primarily not a spectator sport but rather a participant sport. It is also noncompetitive. Essentially, the performers are the animals involved rather than the humans. The actual contest is between a sharp-witted fox and a pack of keen-nosed hounds. The horses make it possible for the humans to witness the work of the canine pursuers and, more often than not, the triumph of the fox pursued. Unless he hunts hounds himself, the Master of Foxhounds merely leads, commands and disciplines the field once hounds are in cry. In most hunts, a professional Huntsman is employed. He is assisted by two whippers-in—who may be either professional or amateur. All the humans do is ride to hounds. Keeping up with them, however, calls for long, hard riding.

To make it more difficult there are a variety of natural fences and other obstacles which have to be jumped, often at high speed. Sociability plays a definite part in the sport and riders are much of the time in a column of twos, enabling them to chat with each other—though silence is required when hounds are drawing (trying to find a fox), running or have checked and are puzzling out the line.

ALL THE ELEMENTS OF BATTLE

Fox hunting is, of course, steeped in custom, and tradition governs dress, idiom and etiquette. Probably no modern fox hunter wears a white stock fastened with a gold safety pin with any real expectation that he will need them to bandage a wound or fracture, but a stock is always worn and that is its real purpose. The time of day is always referred to as "morning." It is "morning" until hounds go home even if it's in the middle of the

The velvet cap of the staff outranks even the silk hat in the hunting field and a warning call of "Huntsman, please" peremptorily scatters horses and riders out of his way. There is no rational reason either why fox hunters should wear a tan rat-catcher coat during the cubbing (preformal) season, a black coat after the formal opening and a scarlet coat only after the Master invites them to do so. The only reason is binding custom, usage, legend and tradition. The men, women and children who like these things like fox hunting. A chance to get out into the country, ride a horse and watch hounds pit their brains and speed against an animal as primitive and cunning as the fox is a challenge, a thrill and a satisfaction which few can resist once they have been entered to the sport. A good hunt has all the elements of battle—danger, strategy, science, human endurance and death. And its greatest appeal is in its suspense. Even the Huntsman cannot tell where, when, or even whether the fox will pilot them across open country, through woodland, into thicket, along a fence or over it, or up against barbed wire. Because of the great difference in country, no two hunts are the same. Methods of hunting vary considerably according to local conditions. The style of hunting with Mr. Stewart's Cheshire Foxhounds, of Unionville, Pa., a larger, privately owned pack, differs vastly from the way the Meadow Brook hunts. The Meadow Brook hunt costs about \$35,000 a year to operate, with fees of \$400 for a single subscription and \$500 for a family of two. A junior subscription costs \$150 and the capping fee for a day's hunting is \$15.

Early on any hunting day Huntsman Plumb can be found at the kennels looking over the hounds. As soon as they hear his voice they crowd forward with excitement and expectation. The Meadow Brook crossbreeds are a pack of which any huntsman

On this day, Huntsman Plumb decides to use twenty-and-a-half couple—15 couple of doghounds and five-and-a-half of bitches. Carefully he chooses them to make up a well-balanced pack. He used to ride to the Meet with hounds around him, but traffic conditions have become so bad that they must now be taken there in a van. By now Huntsman Plumb knows where the hazards lie and he tries to give a good day's sport without interruptions.

A DAY WITH HOUNDS

The Meet this morning is at 9 a.m. at Piping Rock on the horse-show grounds. By the time the Huntsman and hounds arrive the scene is one of great activity. Crammed along the side of the road are horse vans and automobiles—some still disgorging horses and riders arriving for the hunt. Everywhere there is movement and animated chatter as riders greet each other and prepare themselves. Grooms tack up the horses, sleek, huge hunters standing alert and impatient. On the outskirts the riders, already mounted, warm up their horses in preparation for the hard riding to come. Gradually the rest of the field mounts. Long-skirted ladies wearing silk hats mount sidesaddle; others in black hunting bowlers, black coat and eggnog-colored breeches sit astride their horses. Taper-legged young men make a last-minute check of girths and curb chains and move their mounts off at a walk. Here and there in the crowd is a scarlet coat—the traditional hunting "pink," so called after a London tailor who made the best. There are children out today too, six-year-olds and others of all ages. They stand together, tiny miniatures of their parents, all wearing the velvet cap (the only members of the field permitted to do so except the hunt staff) but expressing their individuality in their boots—some in quite irregular, but much-loved, cowboy boots. The children have been brought up in

Over to one side Huntsman Plumb and the Master, Mr. Hickox, discuss which coverts are to be drawn. Then it is time to move off. The horn sounds its long-drawn "Toooo-oot!" and Huntsman and hounds lead the way. The riders, Mr. Hickox at their head, follow after, strung out across the field, jogging at a trot towards the first covert.

As he rides, Huntsman Plumb takes a check on the wind. He is as conscious of it as a sailor, for he prefers to draw the covert up-wind. Should he reverse the procedure—with the fox winding the hounds first—Old Reynard would get away from covert early and be gone. This is a dry day, but the wind is gentle and Huntsman Plumb has his plan already formed.

First covert to be drawn today is a rhododendron thicket on Planting Fields Estate, and as the hounds reach it they fan out and cast themselves.

They crash into the undergrowth, ignoring the cat briar, their noses at work and sterns waving. Darting, pushing, weaving and jumping hounds scramble through bramble and bur, working all the way, necks bent low, inquisitive noses snuffing dry ground.

Suddenly an inexperienced hound—one of the young entry—runs riot after a rabbit. Whipper-in Billy Moffatt flies after the offender, shouting "Leave it.... Leave it" and his whip cracks out like a pistol shot. Back swings the misled hound to join the rest of the pack and on they sweep back and forth, spread out and forever pressing onward, working every inch of the ground. Scent is catchy this morning. But wait...Dauntless is speaking to it, her stern feathering. Huntsman Plumb watches her closely. He knows she's not apt to speak unless certain of it. Now Damon has joined her. A whimper...an unmistakable whimper. But Dauntless must be sure. Her nose draws another figure eight on the ground. Finally she owns the line and, lifting her head to the skies, she proclaims "fox" with a cry that sets every spine tingling and every hackle on end. All hounds rush to her, honoring it, and as one grand chorus their cry fills the woods as the pack and Huntsman stream away to the west.

Now the blood begins to tingle. This is it. Cigarettes are quickly thrown away, hats are pushed nearer to the tops of ears and horses like their riders catch the excitement of the moment. Then they are off, breaking away at a full gallop eager to get up near the front at the beginning, riders leaning forward, some standing in the irons, their coattails streaming. Now is the time to swallow hard, gather your horse under you and take off.... Behind the charging mass come the children, well to the rear but bravely going flat out as fast as tiny pony legs can carry them. At the tail end a lumbering, shaggy round ball of a black pony called Angus snorts along under 8-year-old Stewart Maloney. For too long Angus has been pastured with cattle and he thinks he is a cow. He's never jumped a big fence yet, but maybe this will be the day he catches on at last.

Up front the going is fast and breathless. Horses begin to sweat and lather and as fence and fallen tree rise up out of the onrushing ground, hearts jump up into mouths as dry as sand. Now the riders begin to show. Up and over sail the horses, their jumping a thing of beauty. Terrifyingly, out of nowhere something high and formidable looms up before a rider. Too late to pull up...just time to grab a firm hold of the mane. The horse puts in a short one, pops up and over, and lands going away. Surprised, the rider comes down on the other side, both stirrups lost, hugging the beast's warm neck and praying quietly. The hands which have never left the horse's neck press down hard and push up, and suddenly horse and rider straighten out and are flashing across the grass, elated now and still with the best of them.

Behind in the distance a smashing of a top rail, a dull thud and a loose horse canters off into the next field.

Hounds have checked. Thank Heaven. Time for a breather. Now we shall see if they can work out the line as well as run their fox. Back and forth and round and round they go, their noses busy all the time. The field stands off, collecting wits and breath, steam rising from the horses. A hat is straightened, cheeks glow with the flush of the first burst and a ruddy-faced old gentleman steals a quick nip of sherry from a saddle flask. All eyes are on hounds, waiting and watching. Watching too are the hilltoppers, the groups of hunting enthusiasts who are not mounted today but who love to follow the hunt across the countryside in cars. Suddenly, from one of them a shout, "TA-LLY-HO...TA-LLY-HO."

He has seen a fox break out of Appledore and now he stands pointing in that direction. Quietly Huntsman Plumb gathers his hounds, moves toward the holloa and casts them. Again hounds own the line. Into cat briars they go, charging in full cry, their heads now up to catch the breast-high scent. They break out of covert, running well packed and speaking to it all the time. Field after field is left behind, and the number of riders dwindles. Some are unable to keep up the pace and others have had enough, but the bunched few in the lead go racing on. Relentlessly they fling themselves after hounds, into woods, out into meadow, back into woods and out onto plough. This is hunting pace—like a cavalry charge in battle.

Two fields ahead a rust-colored streak of lightning is seen hugging the ground and running fast. A sliver of red hangs from his mouth. The fox's tongue is hanging out—a sure sign he is weakening. Put to his last resources Old Reynard tries every trick, doubling back into the woods, trying to save his brush. Older hounds push to the front. They know. The end is nearing. Now is the time to be in the first flight. The Huntsman has before him a sinking fox. The excitement brings out the thruster in everybody and to be in that first flight is the most important thing in the world. The fox is in one field, the Huntsman and hounds are in the next and the riders are in the third. Horses are winded and no longer respond to whip and spur. The hounds are clamorous—Panic and Christmas and Dorothy and the rest come shrieking as loud as their nearly pumped-out wind will allow. Back into covert they go. Every hound is up and running for him. A quick turn—and another—Old Reynard is pulling out all of his tricks. Through a field of cattle to foil his scent; circling to double back across his own line. In full view of the field he stops and looks over his shoulder disdainfully smiling at the confusion among hounds. And then he's off again. But throw the pack off he cannot. Hounds are pressing him hard, their crashing music bringing the whole woods alive.... They are upon him. A snap, a turn and a tumble and it is all over.

CEREMONY OF THE KILL

Leaping from his horse Huntsman Plumb grabs the fox from the hounds and holds it high over his head out of reach. With a knife he quickly cuts off the mask (head) and brush. On panting, heaving, lathered horses the first flighters come up in time to see Huntsman throw the fox's carcass into the air for the hounds.

"Er-ray-ay, Er-ray-ay," goes the horn at his lips, announcing the kill. "Whooo-ooop.... Whooo-ooop," he cries out, repeating the long, slow mournful call on the horn. Hounds deserve their reward. They have run their fox for more than 50 minutes over a difficult terrain and with catchy scent. The field—what is left of them—stands about discussing the day's sport. The Master presents the mask and brush to two of those lucky enough to be in at the kill and the paws to the children who were well up front. A newcomer who has not hunted before is "blooded" to his first fox in traditional style: Blood from one of the fox's pads is daubed on his cheek, initiating him for all time to a sport which has been called "the image of war without its guilt and only five-and-twenty percent of its danger."

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