

# AMERICAN FOXHUNTING

## INTRODUCTION

Foxhunting is the sport of mounted riders chasing wild quarry with a pack of hounds. It is a union of humans and animals in the beauty of nature's setting. Man is an observer mounted on a horse, the vehicle that allows him to follow and observe the hounds as they hunt the fox. The scenario unwinds before the foxhunters eyes and ears with the sound of the huntsman's hunting horn as hounds give chase. The fox or coyote maneuvers, circles and runs through the country cunningly evading the hounds.

The music of hounds in "full cry" is laced with the sound of the horn echoing off the woodlands and hills as they pursue the quarry across plains or through woods, fields, creeks, marshes and over rock walls and fences. A crescendo of sounds and sights that thrill you beyond imagination play out in front of you and your horse until the fox goes to ground or hounds lose the scent and the hunt is over. One can compare it to a theatrical production with mother nature the conductor and the hounds in full cry, accompanied by the hunting horn, the orchestra. Man is the audience privileged to watch, as hounds and fox or coyote, the actors, unveil the plot with never ever the same act repeated twice.

## HISTORY

Foxhunting has existed in North America since Colonial days and was enjoyed extensively by night hunters, farmers and landed gentry. The earliest record of the importation of hounds to this country was on June 30, 1650, when Robert Brooke arrived in Maryland with his family and hounds. By the early 1700's, foxhunting was increasing rapidly in Maryland, Virginia and probably other colonies. The earliest surviving record of American foxhunting in the modern manner, by what is now known as an organized hunt, maintained for the benefit of a group of foxhunters rather than for a single owner, is for the pack instituted by Thomas, Sixth Lord Fairfax in 1747 in northern Virginia. The Blue Ridge Hunt today hunts over much of his former territory. Much of what little is recorded about early hunting comes from letters written by Lord Fairfax and the diaries of George Washington. Washington, the first president of the United States, was an ardent foxhunter who owned his own pack of hounds. Washington's diaries are laced with frequent references to foxhunts near the nations capital. On one occasion while congress was in session, hounds ran near the capital. Many congressmen ran outside to watch hounds and some jumped on their horses and joined the chase. The earliest established foxhound club was the Montreal Hunt in Canada 1826. In the United States, the Piedmont Foxhounds were established in Virginia in 1840. Both packs continue very successfully to this day.

Through the years North American foxhunting has evolved its own distinct flavor which is noticeably different from the British. The most obvious difference is that in North America the emphasis is on the chase rather than the kill. In addition, the coyote, not the fox, is hunted by a very large number of Hunts. The coyote has increased by large numbers throughout the United States and Canada. It is bigger, stronger and faster than a fox. In Britain the goal is to kill the fox. Because there is no rabies in the British Isles, populations of fox are extremely high and fox are considered vermin. Farmers with sheep farms want the animal numbers controlled. In America this is not normally the case. A successful hunt ends when the fox is accounted for by entering a hole

in the ground, called an earth. Once there, hounds are rewarded with praise from their huntsman. The fox gets away and is chased another day. When hounds do not account for a fox by chasing him to an earth!

he vast majority of times hounds lose the scent of the fox and that ends the hunt. On many hunts scent isn't sufficient for hounds to run at all. They cannot run what they can't smell. Even these slow days are fun as the scenery is always beautiful, fellow foxhunters are enjoyable and watching the hounds as they attempt to find the quarry is pleasurable. That is not to say that foxhounds in America do not sometimes kill but it is always the exception. Fox populations in hunt country are exceptionally healthy due to natural selection.

In some parts of North America coyotes have become a nuisance and are destroying livestock. While this too is the exception, in those situations Hunts do attempt to kill the coyote with limited success.

## QUARRY AND TERRAIN

The generic term foxhunting applies to red fox, grey fox, coyote and bobcat chasing depending on location. In colonial days the primary quarry was the grey fox. Red foxes were found only in Canada and as far south as New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The grey fox was native to the country south of there. Some red foxes migrated to the southern states. Others were imported from England and released. What animal is hunted depends on the geographic location of the hunt. Today in North America the coyote has become a significant quarry as well as the fox. Coyotes are very adaptable and have migrated across America reaching areas of Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania.

There is tremendous variety of both terrain and quarry in the United States and Canada. Hounds hunt red fox along the sand dunes of Long Island Sound. They hunt red and grey foxes, coyotes and bobcats in the pine woods of Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Mississippi, Florida and the Carolinas. The stony fields and thick deciduous growth of New England make perfect covert for the red fox. Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware offer a countryside closer to the traditional English landscape. Here, the fox is plentiful. Moving westward, there is hunting on the great plains of the Mid-west, in the high altitudes of the Rocky Mountains and along the shores of the Pacific Ocean. Coyotes predominate as one moves westward. Canada has the same variety of terrain and quarry as one moves from east to west. Foxhunting exists in thirty-five states and four Canadian provinces.

## ORGANIZED FOXHUNTING

Foxhunting is a highly organized sport. The Masters of Foxhounds Association, established in 1907, is a non-profit corporation formed to; set and maintain high sporting standards among its membership, encourage foxhunting, approve and register territories on official maps of foxhunting countries, settle disputes in regard to the same, register eligible foxhounds in a Foxhound Stud Book and improve the breed of foxhounds. To be a member of the Association a hunt must have the necessary number of qualified hounds, proper kennel facilities, a hunt country of suffi-

cient size that does not conflict with another hunt and an established organization. Most importantly, member hunts must agree to abide by the rules and guidelines which include animal care and good sportsmanship as directed by the MFHA. The Association encourages membership as the best way to keep up the high sporting standards it insists upon.

The Masters of Foxhound Association insists on compliance with its rules and standards in order to organize and supervise the conduct of the sport. Since the sport does not have the agricultural imperative to control the fox population, American foxhunting emphasizes the thrill of the chase in a beautiful natural setting. To ensure that the sport is conducted with respect for its quarry, the Masters of Foxhound Association of America recently published a booklet entitled *The Code of Hunting Practices* which emphasizes that foxes and coyotes must be hunted in their wild and natural state. Any other practice that does not give an animal a sporting chance is contrary to the best traditions of the sport and is strictly forbidden. All hunts, in both the United States and Canada, who are members of the Association must follow this code or lose their membership.

## HUNT ORGANIZATION

A hunt can be organized in several different ways. It may be a private pack owned and supported by an individual, or it can be a subscription pack where members pay a fee to hunt and the hounds are owned by a club or a hunt committee. In the later case, the hunt committee appoints a Master or Masters. The majority of American hunts are subscription or membership packs. Their organization is similar to many golf clubs. One pays a fee to be a member and hunt. This money is used to feed and care for hounds and for hunt associated expenses. The season for foxhunting is from when the crops are harvested in the fall until the spring when they are planted. Since no one knows where a wild fox may take them, large areas of land are required to have a successful hunt.

The members either elect a Master or elect a hunt committee which then appoints the Master. Masters serve for designated periods and are responsible to the members or hunt committee. It is the Master who is responsible for the days sport and he makes the decisions. The proper care and handling of hounds is his responsibility. He or she makes every effort to maintain a cordial relationship with the owners over whose lands the hunt rides. He supervises the hound breeding program, schedules the hunt meet locations and appoints the hunt staff who work for him. If he does not hunt the hounds himself, he appoints a huntsman who is sometimes a professional. Most hunts have more than one master. The Joint-Masters share responsibilities. If a master doesn't lead the field himself he appoints a field master who is responsible for the riders who follow the field master. The field master's job is to keep the field of riders close enough to enjoy watching the hounds yet not so close as to interfere with the huntsman hunting his hounds.

Whippers-in assist the huntsman in hunting the hounds. They are an extension of the huntsman, usually far out on the flanks, and are used to help assure that the hounds do the huntsman's bidding. They act as safety valves to prevent hounds from running onto roads or land not open to hunting and they assist the huntsman with a myriad of tasks related to the hunt. Other help is often needed in the hunting field. A designated person is responsible for closing gates and someone else supervises juniors and hilltoppers (those individuals who follow more slowly in the rear). Some hilltoppers follow in cars along roads. Lastly there is the hunt secretary who collects capping fees (nonmember riders that are guests of members who are out for a day's hunting pay a

small fee to ride with the hunt). The secretary takes care of the many administrative requirements of the hunt such as checking to see that horses have current coggins tests.

## HOUNDS

To breed a pack of hounds that measures up to the Association standards is no easy task. The MFHA Foxhound Kennel Stud Book has been in existence since 1907 and keeps track of all hounds bred by member hunts in the United States and Canada. There are three hound classifications: English, American and Crossbred. The English hound, as his name implies, is a hound whose ancestors are in the English Foxhound Studbook. American and English hounds must have less than one sixteenth outcross blood in their pedigree to be considered pure. Some of the best known varieties of American hounds are the Bywater hound, the Walker hound and the July hound. Crossbred hounds are a cross between English and American hounds. Only in Canada does the English hound predominate. Crossbred hounds are the most popular in the United States.

## REGISTRATION

For a new hunt to be registered and eventually recognized, it must have twelve couples (hounds are always counted by twos hence the word "couple") of entered registered or registerable hounds for a live hunt, or six couples of entered hounds if a drag hunt. (A hunt which hunts fox scent rather than live quarry.) The hunt must also have a breeding program and produce their own hounds. Their kennels must meet the qualifications of sanitation and space. Since hounds must be trained and controllable, training starts before a hound is a year old. Since he must hunt with a pack, and not as an individual, he is usually coupled (attached by a collar to an older hound) and walked with him until he realizes that he is to stay with the others. Early training takes place on foot with the huntsman and whippers-in supervising. Once the young hounds are under control, they are introduced to horses when the staff mounts up and hounds are exercised with fitness being the goal. As hound!

s hunt over private farmland, they must ignore all farm animals and other dogs and pursue only the chosen quarry. The chasing of any other wildlife is also not allowed. A hound begins to hunt at roughly twelve to eighteen months of age. If he meets the standards set by the staff, he will be entered by that particular hunt. His name, preceded by the hunt's name and three generations of his bloodlines are sent to the Masters of Foxhounds Association and he will officially be registered in the Stud Book. The goal of hound breeding is to produce a pack of hounds that will run uniformly (stay together as a pack), give great tongue (known as cry), show stamina, nose (a keen sense of smell) and be biddable to the huntsman (obey commands). The hounds receive their commands from the huntsman through the use of his or her horn, voice and the body position of the huntsman and his horse.

## ATTIRE

There is a formal dress code for foxhunters. Black leather boots, breeches, heavy or light hunting coat, a shirt with a tie or stock tie and a protective hat are called for. Every hunt has two seasons: cub hunting when young hounds are introduced into the pack, and the formal season. The cubbing season allows for less formal attire called "ratcatcher". Ratcatcher normally refers to a dark

sport coat or hacking jacket and a shirt and tie or turtle neck shirt. In warmer climates coats are not required. Cub hunting also is the period when horses and hounds are conditioned and trained. At the same time, the foxes learn to evade hounds and become conditioned and smarter by being chased for longer periods of time as the season progresses. During cub hunting hounds are hunted only long enough to assure they are hunting the proper game. They are not kept out for long.

When the formal season opens the staff wears its livery, often red coats with white breeches and black boots with tan leather tops. Members who follow as the Field wear black coats, buff breeches and black boots. Most hunts allow their gentlemen members to wear red coats. Lady masters and members of the staff also often wear red coats. Some members add to the elegance and wear cutaway coats (red for men, black for ladies) with a top hat. Hunting gear, which has changed little since foxhunting began, is based on practicality. The heavy boots and breeches protect riders from branches and brambles. Heavy melton coats are almost waterproof. The stock tie, fastened with a plain gold safety pin, can serve as a bandage for man, hound or horse in case of an accident.

## THE FOX

Some might wonder why foxes in their natural environment bother to run such long distances when it would seem easy for them to find a hole and go to ground. Foxes are territorial animals. They know every inch of their feeding range and it would be a simple matter for them to jump into the first convenient earth (the term for foxes' lair or den). Sometimes they do, to the disappointment of the hunters, but often as not they choose to run. One cannot apply human reasoning to the fox. One can only suppose he chooses to run because he wants to or does not feel threatened enough to bother going to ground. A fox lives by scent. He knows good and bad scenting days. This may have an influence on how long he runs or if he feels he can lose the hounds without going to ground. Many foxhunters believe that some foxes undoubtedly enjoy the chase. This may sound far fetched, but it is true that on certain days, it appears, some foxes play with the hounds almost teasing them by backtracking and circling past their dens when they could easily go to ground. Foxes have been seen to stop and hunt mice or birds while hounds are chasing them. As humans we should not presume to understand what the fox thinks. We can only say that experience has shown that a fox often seems to be under little stress. When the fox does choose to run, he gives us the opportunity to observe one of Earth's great predators demonstrating his finest skills.

## THE COYOTE

The coyote also gives great sport if and when he becomes territorial. His range is far greater but he will run a pattern like a red fox if he has established a territory. The coyote is not as territorial as a fox. Some are nomads and seldom establish a territory. These coyotes, when chased, will run straight lines and take packs of hounds out of their assigned hunting areas sometimes losing the field of riders. Coyote hunting is much more popular in Western and Southern America where large open spaces prevail. The coyote scent is stronger than that of a fox and he can be chased more successfully than a fox in a drier climate like the high deserts of Colorado, California, Wyoming and Nevada. He can sometimes be chased when fox cannot be chased because of poor scenting conditions. He is a beautiful swift and clever animal. Coyotes have often been known to

run in relays with one animal deliberately replacing the original hunted coyote. They also frequently are found in groups which sometimes results in hounds going in several directions at the same time.

When this happens whippers-in must stop the split and get hounds onto one coyote. Coyotes are masters at running at various speeds depending on their moods and conditions. Some hunters say that coyotes run only fast enough to stay ahead of the hounds. When they want the hunt to end, they often easily accelerate away from the hounds. When the coyote gets tired of the game, he sometimes will enter a den of sorts which could be a hole under a tree or in a dried up creek bed. In some cases a coyote will stop and turn on hounds. In those rare cases hounds that are not accustomed to coyotes will be put off by the size and aggressive nature of the coyote and can be called away.

## CONCLUSION

The popularity of foxhunting continues to grow. Currently there are 171 organized clubs in North America. There are many reasons for its popularity. There is an old adage that says, some people ride to hunt, others hunt to ride. Certainly the thrill of galloping over the countryside on a fine horse who meets his fences well, is a thrill for anyone. Also, the sight of a pack of hounds in full cry is breathtaking. Today's hunters have a special reward, the permission to ride over private and public land which still constitutes magnificent open spaces. No group of individuals is more aware of this privilege, nor is there a group more outspoken in their desire to protect quarry and preserve their environment. It is enjoyed by people from all walks of life and any age. It is a wonderful recreation for the whole family that can be enjoyed for a lifetime.