

TRADITION

It is believed that George Washington himself imported the first pack of fox hounds to America. The Keswick Hunt itself is 110 years old this coming December. There are foxhunts now in many states of the union, including Nevada, where they chase coyote and Georgia where they pursue bobcat. But they all adhere to a strict code of conduct, speech and dress that is steeped in centuries of tradition. Sometimes people confuse this tradition with elitism.

Dress and conduct codes: during week-days, people are allowed to dress in informal attire, called "rat catcher." It still means gentlemen must wear a coat and tie, breeches and knee-high polished boots, that their horse and tack is clean and unadorned. In the hunt field, riders are expected to conduct themselves in a civilized manner. In other words, they don't ride up on people in front of them; they keep their mouths shut; they wait their turn at jumps; they never pass the Field Master; and they never ever interfere with Huntsman, staff or hounds. And if their horse kicks a hound, they are summarily excused from the field.

Saturdays and holidays are formal days. Everyone, except Huntsman, staff, and those who have earned their "colors," must wear a black coat, with a white cravat, called a stock, light-colored breeches and black boots to the knee...all of it impeccably clean. The horse too must be clean and this can be a problem for those who own light gray or white horses. The Virginia clay turns them pink.

Speaking of pink, there is this matter of "colors." Colors are an honor bestowed by the Masters on club members who consistently demonstrate good citizenship in the

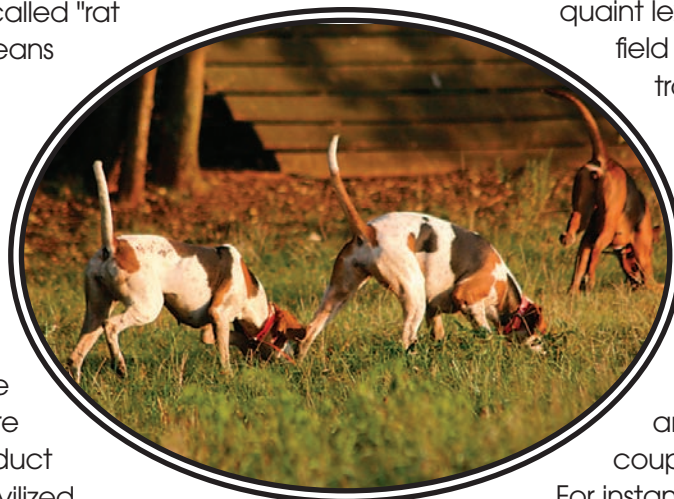
field and who volunteer their time and effort, but not necessarily their money, for the club. Charlotte Tieken points out that Keswick, with only two paid employees, is one of the most affordable hunt clubs in the country. It relies heavily on volunteers.

Anyway, "colors" give gentlemen the right to wear the scarlet or "pink" coat on formal days. Ladies who have earned their colors are more subtle about it. They trim the collar of their formal black hunting jacket with the hunt's color, in Keswick's case, dark green.

Figures of speech: There is a quaint lexicon in the hunt field that requires some translation. Everyone gathers at a "meet" or "fixture," not a starting-off place. They are "hounds," never dogs. They "speak;" they do not bark. Hounds are counted by the couple, not individually.

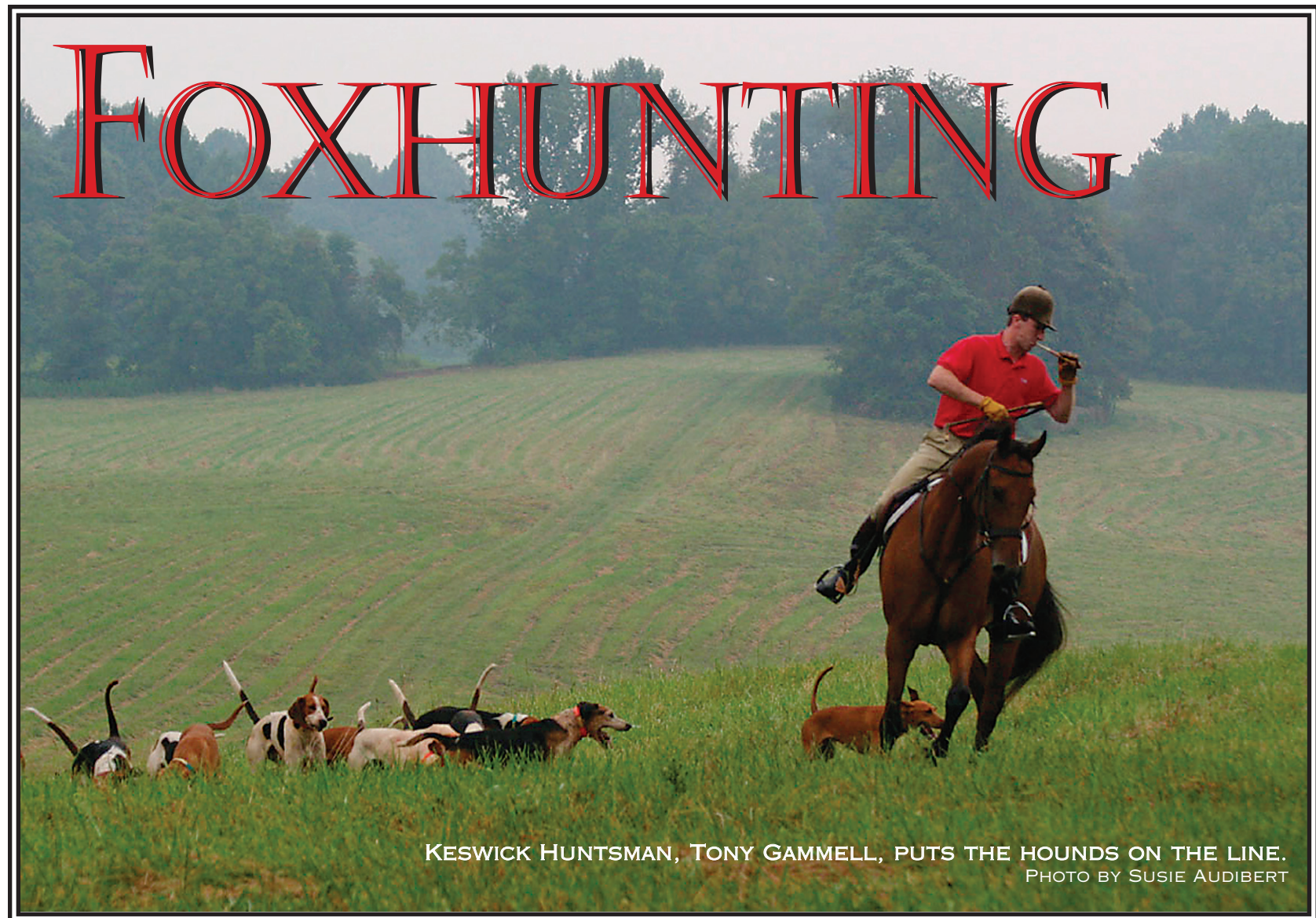
For instance, if the huntsman is bringing 16 and a half couple, he's got 33 hounds on board. These hounds have been trained to not riot (chase other game, such as deer) while waving their "sterns," not tails. The coat is "scarlet" or "pink," but not red. Horses hurdle "fences," "coops" or "panels," not jumps. You don't holler when you see a fox, you "holloa." A fox hides in "covert" not cover (pronounced the same...silent "t"). He has a "mask," not a face and a "brush," not a tail. He "goes to ground;" he does not dive into a hole. He is "viewed," not seen, and you are thrown out when inadvertently left behind.

One of the most amusing terms in fox-hunting is "cur dog." That is any dog other than a foxhound. He could be the winner of Westminster, but to foxhunters, with a sly wink, he's a "cur dog." It's probably best not to tell that to the owner of the bull terrier that won last month at Madison Square Garden.



WITH A QUICK TOOT OF HIS HUNTING HORN, HUNTSMAN TONY GAMMELL, ABOVE, GATHERS UP THE HOUNDS AND "DRAWS" THEM IN A PLACE THAT LOOKS LIKE IT MIGHT YIELD A FOX. BELOW, THE "FIELD" FOLLOWS THE FIELD MASTER, LARRY LEVY. NO ONE IS TO PASS HIM. CENTER, HOUNDS FOLLOW THE SCENT TRAIL OF A FOX.

PHOTOS BY PHIL AND SUSIE AUDIBERT



KESWICK HUNTSMAN, TONY GAMMELL, PUTS THE HOUNDS ON THE LINE. PHOTO BY SUSIE AUDIBERT

Whether you're on the back of a \$10,000 horse or on the tailgate of a \$50 pickup truck, there is something about foxhunting that stirs the blood. The sound of hounds in full cry, the sight of a crafty fox making his escape, the adrenaline rush of the chase, all against the backdrop of the Virginia countryside, appeals equally to the good ol' boy as it does the lords of the manor.

It has little to do with catching foxes. If it did, they'd call it fox-catching, not foxhunting. And in fact, there is a move to rename the sport "fox chasing."

It also has nothing to do with pinky-pointing elitists, at least not in this neck of the woods. A cross section of the Keswick Hunt Club reveals a layer cake of social strata still in the mixing bowl stage, from public school teachers to professors, from dirt farmers to estate owners, from good ol' boys to lords of the manor.

So what is it about foxhunting?

Charlotte Tieken of Somerset is Joint Master of Foxhounds of the Keswick Hunt Club, which holds many of its "meets" here in Orange County. Even she has trouble defining the allure. "It's a sensation and a love that's very difficult to describe if you

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THE HOUNDS TAKE THE COOP BUT THE HUNTSMAN HAS DIFFERENT PLANS ON A BEAUTIFUL AUTUMN DAY JUST OUTSIDE THE TOWN OF ORANGE.

PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT



UNDER IDEAL SCENTING CONDITIONS, THE TEMPERATURE WILL BE COOL, BUT NOT FREEZING, THE WIND WILL BE CALM, AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, THE AIR WILL BE HUMID. MOIST EARTH WILL KEEP A FOX'S SCENT DOWN LOW WHERE HOUNDS CAN SNIFF IT.



USUALLY, SOMEONE WILL SEE THE FOX AS IT SCURRIES AWAY AND THAT PERSON WILL YELL "TALLY-HO" AT THE TOP OF HIS LUNGS AND MARK THE DIRECTION OF TRAVEL

PHOTOS BY PHIL AUDIBERT



USUALLY, THE FOX ELUDES THE HOUNDS OR "GOES TO GROUND" BY SEEKING SHELTER IN A HOLE. OR, THE SCENTING CONDITIONS CHANGE AND THE HOUNDS LOSE TRACK OF HIM. MAYBE ONE OF EVERY 100 FOXES CHASED IS ACTUALLY CAUGHT.



haven't done it," she tries to explain. "It's different things for different people. If you were to line 10 different people up you will find there are 10 different reasons why they're out there."

For some it would be listening to and watching hounds do what they are bred to do. These people know and appreciate hounds, their voices, their drive, their personalities. They can tell you which hound is out front just by the sound he makes.

"Other people, it's their horse," continues Charlotte. "They want to run. They like to run and jump. They like the thrill of galloping across a field and jumping 20 jumps a day and being one with their own horse." She pauses for a breath. "A third person it could be nothing more than sitting on top of a hill looking out over a valley on an October day with the changing leaves, and the thrill of that moment of being with nature at the most beautiful time of the year." She pauses again and adds, "so everybody's got their own little individual pleasures. But all in all, there's always a cohesive bond that permeates a group of people on a foxhunt, that's very exciting."

This coming weekend, Keswick's 2005-2006 foxhunting season comes to a reluctant close. Ever since this past fall, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays, weather permitting, members and guests have gathered to enjoy this traditional sport. Many have risen long before dawn, preparing their horse and themselves. Dressed in traditional garb, they will trailer their horse to the mid-morning "meet," or gathering place. Girths are cinched, tack is checked for the third time, and stomach knots tighten as they await the start of the hunting day.

The Huntsman, a much respected and affable fellow from Askeaton, Ireland, Tony Gammell, arrives with about two thirds of his pack of 50 hounds. During off days, he has done everything from taking his beloved hounds out on foot, to building the signature "coop" jumps that straddle barbed wire and plank fences in our area.

Under ideal scenting conditions, the temperature will be cool, but not freezing, the wind will be calm, and most importantly, the air will be humid. It would be nice if a gentle rain had fallen the night before. Moist earth will keep a fox's scent

down low where hounds can sniff it.

With a quick toot of his hunting horn, Tony gathers up the hounds and "draws" them in a place that looks like it might yield a fox. He is accompanied by a small "staff" of "whippers-in," who spread out on his flanks. Their job includes alerting the Huntsman if a fox is seen, keeping track of which way the fox went and heading the fox away from busy roads, among other tasks. The "field" follows at a respectful distance. Typically there are two fields...the first flight, which will run hard and take jumps, and the "hill toppers" who follow at a more leisurely pace and go through gates. Both are controlled by Field Masters.

It is the Huntsman's show. He calls all the shots, and it's up to everybody else to stay out of his way. Encouraging his hounds with whistles, calls and shouts, Tony relies on a wealth of experience, knowledge and "gut feeling," in planning his strategy. This part of the hunt appeals to the chess players, the puzzle-solvers.

Typically, a hound will "open" if it scents a fox. The rest will rush to join the chase, baying at the top of their lungs. This part appeals to the listeners...those who bask in the "music of the hounds."

Usually, someone will see the fox as it scurries away and that person will yell "Tally-Ho" at the top of his lungs and mark the direction of travel without interfering with the scent trail. These people get their kicks from seeing the animal, maybe even photographing it. Encouraged by the Huntsman, the hounds pursue and the field goes off on a run that can last from minutes to hours. This part appeals to everyone else for obvious reasons.

Usually, the fox eludes the hounds or

"goes to ground" by seeking shelter in a hole. Or, the scenting conditions change and the hounds lose track of him; at which point the whole thing comes to a grinding halt, only to be repeated.

Maybe one of every 100 foxes chased is actually caught. "Typically when fox get killed is because they have mange and they're diseased on some level," says Charlotte Tieken. "The art is chasing fox, not killing fox. In this country killing fox is a rare occurrence." In fact when foxhunters see a fox dead on the road, they shed a quiet tear, for that is one less fox to pursue and one less fox to breed and multiply.

The fox population is doing rather well in our area these days. "Like all wild animals, foxes establish their territory and if not disrupted by the influx of coyote or trapping, they tend to sort out their territory on their own," says Charlotte. "Coyotes

are beginning to come in and they can run fox away."

The fox is an interesting fellow. Usually nocturnal by nature, "Charlie," as they call him, makes his living hunting small animals such as mice, rabbits and birds. Foxes can sometimes be seen eating grasshoppers in fields and pastures in late summer. They breed in early winter and have pups in the spring. On a typical winter's day, a fox will find a protected sunny spot, curl up and take a nap.

If people walk by, he will most likely wake up and watch warily. But he won't move. He doesn't need to... because we're clueless. But, if he senses hounds in his area, he knows that his scent will reveal his whereabouts, and so he departs, often stealthily at first. If hounds pursue, he will run, and he will run fast, sometimes in a circle, sometimes in a straight line, sometimes helter-skelter. There are countless stories of a fox's legendary cunning...walking in water, back-tracking, climbing trees, even following deer... all to confuse hounds.

To many foxhunting enthusiasts, hounds are where it's at...their voices, their breeding, their stamina, their training, their keenness. Tony, the Huntsman, is a true hound man. He knows all 50 by name and he is adored by them. He has them so well trained that a deer can jump up right in front of them and they won't pay it any mind.

This past summer, Tony married the former Whitney Mason of Orange in his home town in Ireland. The ceremony was attended by dozens of hunt club members, all ecstatic that he has added another level of permanence to his tenure at Keswick.

Some people say there are two kinds of foxhunters, those who hunt to ride, and those who ride to hunt. Either way, the horse plays a critical role, because it can carry a rider over hill and dale, over fences, through streams and

rivers at a pace that can keep up with a running pack of hounds.

Foxhunting horses come in all shapes, sizes and breeds. Suffice it to say, the best ones are physically fit, calm, well-behaved and have the heart to try to do what they are asked.

The most important element to this equation is the land. "I cannot emphasize enough how much landowners need to be appreciated and thanked...how honored we are that they will share their land with us and the importance of their stewardship," says a grateful Charlotte Tieken. "Ninety percent of our landowners feel that they are stewards of the land...and they have on some level agreed to share it. We would have no sport if it weren't for landowners."

As a result, foxhunters are careful to not tread through recently planted crops or stir up livestock or forget to close gates. "You don't want to upset the farmland and we don't want them to think that in any way we are abusing it," says Charlotte. A cavalier attitude towards landowners may have contributed to the recent ban on foxhunting in England. It was a way for the common man to "get" the snobs. Oscar Wilde termed foxhunting the "pursuit of the uneatable by the unspeakable."

Not so in Keswick territory, says Charlotte. "The landowners are encouraged to participate. It's a community event, as opposed to an elitist event. It's a wonderful sport where all socio-economic strata come together." And yes, they welcome and encourage foot followers.

It's been four hours now chasing foxes back and forth through the countryside. The hunt today is winding down. Tongues lolling, the hounds doggedly single track home. Weary riders and horses trudge back to the "meet" where the trailers are parked. Tending to their horses first, the mud-spattered riders gather around a pickup truck and share some much needed food and drink that appeared miraculously. They chat amiably, laugh and share stories. They thank the Huntsman, Masters and staff and head wearily for home.

For a moment there, the prince and the plowman were one and the same.

SOME PEOPLE FOXHUNT TO RIDE HORSES. SOME PEOPLE FOXHUNT TO CHASE FOXES. AND SOME PEOPLE FOXHUNT TO BE A PART OF BEAUTIFUL AUTUMN MORNING IN THE VIRGINIA COUNTRYSIDE.

PHOTO BY SUSIE AUDIBERT

