



HORSES & HOUNDS

THE LOWCOUNTRY HUNT
TAKES TO THE FIELDS

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When you know that a “heads up” is not a good thing and, despite a “stirrup cup,” “larking” will be frowned upon, then you’re versed with the language and traditions of a centuries-old sport known as foxhunting.

Most of us know very little about the sport except that it’s English, requires a horse and a dog, and someone will likely say “Tally-ho” in a rather upper crusty manner.

Foxhunting, however, is far more than that familiar caricature of a snooty English lord. It’s steeped in discipline, skill, and responsibility. People who enjoy this sport are respectful people with a love of their animals and the countryside where they ride.

Unlike the hunt of yore, the foxhunt today isn’t aimed at killing local vermin that raid the hen houses and spread rabies. Today, the hunt has developed into a chase that allows riders to be part of the longstanding traditions yet places their focus on a sport requiring equestrian expertise, skill, and cooperation.



The Lowcountry Hunt, a non-profit group started in 2006 and based in Walterboro, rides on local lands such as Turkey Hill Plantation in Ridgeland and Palmetto Bluff in Bluffton, South Carolina. The Lowcountry Hunt has never had a single kill of any game animal and, indeed, most of their game can outrun them. Grey foxes and coyotes, are both are fleet of foot. The Grey Fox, in fact, can actually scale trees to “outfox” the hounds. It’s one of two canids that has strong hooked claws allowing them to climb. (The other is an Asian Raccoon Dog.) In the coastal area, with so many creeks and marshes, the game animal can rapidly hide or “go to ground”—to use the language of the hunt.

Another interesting element that sets the Lowcountry Hunt apart from others is their enduring efforts with conservation. Partnering with the Lowcountry Open Land Trust, a Charleston-based non-profit, which has protected more than 88,000 acres in the Lowcountry since 1986, these dedicated animal lovers take going green to new levels. The group, winner of a conservation award in 2009 from the National Masters of the Foxhound Association in recognition of their efforts, operates in the ACE Basin, one of the largest undeveloped estuaries on the East Coast. This respect of the native land and wildlife is woven into the core of the organization’s etiquette and is a fundamental part of their mission statement.



Honor is alive and well here in The Lowcountry Hunt and trots happily alongside a sense of family, reverence,—and a jolly good time. The Hunt boasts around 100 registered members, ranging from adolescents to elders. In fact, one of the original founders is in her 70s and still riding a quarter horse that is now 23 years old.

Fox hunting, a centuries-old sport, was brought to America in the late 1600s. In 1770, George Washington, an avid foxhunter, imported 30 hounds, which became the ancestors of today's American foxhound. Generally referred to as "hounds" rather than "dogs"—the first of many differences between them and other breeds such as pointers or spaniels—these spirited foxhounds are bred to follow a scent, known as a line, and, simply, to run.

In fact, it was an American foxhound named Old Drum who inspired the phrase "man's best friend." The designation was plucked from the generous prose of law-

yer George Vest's closing arguments in an 1896 Missouri legal case where a hound's untimely demise at the hands of a churlish sheep farmer was vindicated. In Mr. Vest's heartfelt speech, he was the first to remind us of a dog's steadfast loyalty, stating that "when all other friends desert, he remains. When riches take wings and reputation falls to pieces, he is as constant in his love as the sun in its journey through the heavens." In 1958, a statue of Old Drum was installed in front of the Johnson Country Courthouse in Warrensburg, Mo. The plaque, inscribed with much of the closing argument, stands as a tribute to faithful dogs everywhere.

The horses in foxhunting are, if possible, even more revered than the hounds, since they make the ride possible. The equines come in all shapes, sizes, and ages though, once a good hunter has been found, he or she is treated like a priceless thoroughbred. Fox hunting horses must be able to perform in a group, stop on command, stand





patiently, wait for their turn at jumps, not refuse to jump, and, above all, refrain from kicking other horses and the hounds. Even though fox-hunting is a winter sport, horses can get overheated and end up with a resulting chill. To avoid that, their winter coats are often clipped so they don't retain that problematic moisture and blankets are used for warmth and protection. The tack, saddle, and pads, while simple must, by tradition, be groomed and splendidly turned out.

The riders, too, must adhere to tradition in matters of dress. The history of red coats, often called "pinks," has gotten slightly confused with time but an 1894 dictionary stated that it was a badge of "royal livery for a royal sport" appointed by Henry II. The intricate folds of a rider's neck cloth keep it from blowing in the wind but its required length also originally served as a handy bandage in case of injury.

Of course, there is a special language, that goes along with the hunt and here is where we find that a "heads up" means the hounds have lifted their head from the line or scent. A "stirrup cup" is a light snack or a spot of port given to the riders once they are all mounted on their horses prior to the beginning of the hunt. "Larking" describes the rude

behavior of a participant who may be riding on the heels of another horse or gallivanting ahead without observing the Master of the Hunt.

These languages and traditions have not relaxed in 2013 and they have definitely *not* become a costume merely for having a good time. They are observed as a protocol that marks a distinguished sport and sets it apart from just another trail ride in the countryside. It is a complex and demanding sport, both physically and mentally. There is much to remember and much to be done to obtain a high rank and/or recognition. The people that choose foxhunting are, indeed, a rare breed of person. These are people who carry with them an unflinching awareness of the majesty of the land and who comfortably shoulder stewardship and responsibility. They care for the animals—all of the them—with a unique mixture of high regard and careful deference. Yet, they laugh a lot and are welcoming to those not familiar with their traditions. In fact, even guests without horses are welcomed to ride along or "follow" in a vehicle.

In short, this sophisticated sport is not something most of us see every day in our worlds of reality TV, social media, and smart phones but it is a very special one that should never be allowed to slip away.