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Hunting Clubs Fret as 'Fore' Replaces 'Tally Ho'

By ANDREW JACOBS

With the cry of a copper horn and a symphony of yelping dogs, two dozen members of the Essex Fox Hounds will bolt off into the snowy hills Sunday morning, hoping the pack catches a whiff of their elusive, russet-furred quarry.

For more than a century, Bedminster's huntsmen have allowed the hounds to follow their noses as they scramble through the patchwork of forest and fields that dress the Somerset Hills, a lushly picturesque region that has long been the domain of New Jersey's landed gentry. As goes the fox, so go the hounds, followed by the mounted hunters, who often call it a day the moment their prey disappears into a drain pipe or a den.

But the tradition of letting foxhounds freely roam the countryside is slowly coming to an end. The construction of Interstates 78 and 287 three decades ago lopped off a sizeable chunk of hunt country, and a massive, 3,300-unit condominium complex called the Hills consumed another square mile when construction began in the early 1980's.

These days, however, the biggest threat to Bedminster's patrician pastime is not the strip mall or the split-level. It is the golf course.

In the last year, one of the township's most fabled estates, Hamilton Farm, was sold and converted into a 36-hole exclusive corporate golf club owned by Lucent. And the owners of two other properties, including the former home of John Z. DeLorean, have announced plans to turn several hundred wild acres into manicured fairways.

Although one might expect wealthy townfolk in Bedminster to welcome the arrival of exclusive golf clubs, local residents, many of them avid equestrians, are alarmed that land they once freely rode across is becoming strictly off-limits. "Golf courses are a real threat to our way of life," said David Troast, treasurer of the Essex club, which was founded at the turn of the century. "You simply can't foxhunt on a golf course."

With nearly a thousand acres cordoned off for golfers in the very heart of hunt country, Mr. Troast and his fellow club members were forced last year to scale back their outings to two days a week from three. As large landholders sell parcels for multimillion-dollar trophy homes, hunters increasingly find themselves outfoxed by fences and No Trespassing signs, most of them posted by arrivistes not steeped in Bedminster's land-sharing tradition -- one that for generations perfectly suited families whose names ended in Forbes, Merck and Pierpont.

"Some newcomers are just not keen to have fox hunters come across their land," said Jack Turpin, a local real estate broker who sold Mr. DeLorean his house in 1981. "It's too bad, but on the other hand, it's their property."

While hunt aficionados have a deep appreciation for property rights, they worry that their beloved sport -- one practiced by the ancient Greeks and revived by the English nobility -- will be choked off by change. "If we're not careful, this place is going to start looking like Palm Springs," Mr. Troast said.

Unlike fox hunters, who require vast areas of unimpeded acreage, the foot basset set -- those who chase hares without help from horses -- are not as affected by the loss of open land. Still, they too worry about the forces chipping away at their community's prevailing culture, one that has so far resisted the commercialization and suburbanization that have paved over the charms of so much of the Garden State.

Although she laments the growing limitations to free-range hunting, Anne van den Bergh, a joint master of the Tewksbury Foot Bassets club, said she saw a shift in attitude about land, one that places the private over the communal. She said she had heard it in the language of those who had recently arrived, some of whom used the word "property" instead of "land" to describe their holdings -- land that now costs as much as \$100,000 an acre.

Although it is a subtle distinction, she said, property has a less communal connotation. "It's one of the mental impacts of development," said Mrs. Van den Bergh, who, like her grandfather before her, learned to foot hunt as a child. "People here don't put up deer fencing and they don't sue a landowner because they stepped in a hole." To her and others, the hunt is more than a highly stylized sport. It is a shared experience that binds the community together. "It's companionship and it's continuity," she said.

No one believes Bedminster is fast becoming a Levittown. The town's zoning, which requires 10-acre lots for new houses, keeps out the subdivisions and the sprawl. Because golf courses are seen as less obtrusive than large scale housing, the town officials have until now allowed their construction. Land conservation groups, including the township's own open space trust fund, have already taken hundreds of acres out of development. The result is a strikingly pastoral landscape, one little changed since the turn of the century, when Gilded Age industrialists transformed the area's Dutch and Scottish farms into stately weekend homes.

In a quirk of recent history, 70 percent of the town's 8,000 people live in the Hills, which was built only after its developer successfully sued Bedminster using a state law that requires communities to accept affordable housing. Long-time residents still take a deep breath when they refer to the densely built complex, which more than doubled the population.

"Since the Hills, we've been vigilant in trying to maintain the quality of our community," said Joseph Metelski, a member of the planning board and a former mayor. "We don't get cookie-cutter developments, but on the other hand, you can't exactly zone for fox hunting."

The arrival of golf courses, however, was not something people anticipated. In 1997, when a group of developers was trying to buy Hamilton Farm, members of the Essex Fox Hounds made an offer. "We were a day late, but not a dollar shy," Mr. Troast said.

Since then, he and other fox hunters have formed the Lamington Conservancy, which has been trying to get preservation easements from property owners. Another private group recently paid \$7.7 million to save a portion of the DeLorean estate, which is being developed into an 18-hole golf course by a Connecticut-based company.

Many hunters and equestrians sit on the board of the Upper Raritan Watershed Association, a local organization charged with safeguarding the vast aquifer that provides drinking water to one million New Jersey residents. In a community that values private grumbling over public grousing, the association has been a relentless critic of golf course development, saying that it destroys valuable wildlife habitat while threatening the water supply with fertilizer-laden runoff.

"Hunters and conservationists are natural allies," said David Peifer, executive director of the association, which runs a 150-acre nature preserve adjacent to Hamilton Farm. "When it comes to open space, we both have the same threshold for pain."

Dapper in tweed and corduroy, Joseph B. Wiley stood on the edge of a rolling hillside on Friday afternoon and talked excitedly about the weekend's upcoming hare hunt. Unlike fox hunters, who dress in scarlet jackets, those who chase hare wear green coats, their collars trimmed in brilliant robin's-egg blue. Mr. Wiley, 82, a retired engineer and joint master of the Tewksbury Foot Bassets, said he cherished the exercise, the company of friends and the rich sense of tradition.

"There's something wonderful about the hounds and people flowing across the countryside," he said, his eyes squinting against the glare of sun on snow. As with mounted fox hunters, foot hunters invariably let the hare get away -- so that it can be hunted another day. Mr. Wiley suggested that the hare's worst nightmare is not a pack of barking hounds but the dispassionate creep of development. "I'll tell you one thing, when there were more dairy farms, there were more hares," he said. "Golf courses are not the best wildlife habitat."

Still, like nearly everyone in town, Mr. Wiley concedes there is very little he can do to keep golf out of Bedminster. And, he acknowledged that things could always be worse. "Instead of golf, we could get a lot more houses," he said.