

January 26, 1996

Yoicks! And Off Go Hunters, Hounds And Maybe a Fox

By MONIQUE P. YAZIGI

IT is noontime. Thirty-eight men and women wearing tan breeches and scarlet and black coats with velvet caps gear up for a sport that was a favorite of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and, last year, a scandal for Prince Charles when he took along his young sons.

With their horses and vans in tow, members of the Golden's Bridge Hounds Hunt are meeting at Windswept Farm, the 300-acre hilltop estate of Lois and Eugene Colley in North Salem, N.Y., in preparation for their weekly romp through the countryside known as a fox hunt.

Up at the grand Colonial-style white house, atop the long, winding driveway lined with cows wandering and horses playing in the pastures full of snow, Mrs. Colley prepares coffee, cider, sherry and croissants for the ritual sendoff called the "Stirrup Cup."

At the same time, Mr. Colley, the Master of the Foxhounds, essentially the commander-in-chief of the hunt, wearing a 50-year-old scarlet coat, sits atop his roan horse and gives the group the traditional hunt greeting, "Good morning" (to be said no matter what time of day it is).

"Good morning, Master," respond the gentlemen in the group, slightly tipping their hats, while the ladies nod.

It's something out of a Jane Austen novel or a Merchant-Ivory movie, but this is New York State, and Mr. Colley is a businessman who owns McDonald's franchises.

Fox hunting, full of ritual, tradition and stringent rules, has become more popular in the United States than ever before, according to the Masters of Foxhounds Association of America, a Leesburg, Va.-based group that is the governing body of the sport in this country and Canada. Mr. Colley, who has been fox-hunting for some 40 years, often with his wife and four sons, is one of more than 20,000 registered members of 171 fox-hunting clubs in the United States.

In the New York metropolitan region, there are hunt clubs in Westchester County, Long Island, Connecticut and New Jersey. Besides the riding, they offer all the accouterments of a social circuit: breakfasts, cocktail parties and colorful hunt balls with men in scarlet tails and women in black-and-white gowns. (Tonight, in fact, masters from all over the world will gather at the 25th annual Masters Ball at the Pierre Hotel in Manhattan.)

"They certainly make it more elitist in the East," says one Southern master. Or as Col. Dennis Foster, the head of the foxhounds association, puts it: "Fox hunting is basically a middle-class sport. In many places, it's just a bunch of farmers getting together who enjoy riding across the land."

Not in the New York area, where the snob factor may seem great. Some hunts are like country clubs, setting strict rules to join, while others court new members.

It's not an easy sport -- indeed, it can be dangerous if you don't know what you're doing -- and it certainly is not without controversy (many animal-rights advocates object to it). In addition, the participant must be an experienced rider, with the ability to jump over stone walls and gallop through creeks, all the while being well dressed, mannered and versed in the etiquette of the hunt.

You must also be devoted: hunting clubs ride two and three times a week from as early as August through the end of March, though with all the recent snow, some hunt clubs had to suspend meetings until the ice melted. Other clubs kept meeting simply to walk across the fields and sometimes to exercise the hounds.

No Guns, Maybe No Fox

But while it is a way of life for some, most of the people buying the bucolic hunting scenes on, say, Ralph Lauren paraphernalia have no real idea what this picturesque sport is all about, other than that it's English, and to some, sounds despicable.

"Don't you get on a horse with your gun and shoot at a fox?" asked one Manhattanite shopping for horsey sheets.

No guns. And, sometimes, no fox.

Fox hunting, in general, is the pursuit of wild foxes, red or gray, or coyotes, or sometimes just the scent of fox urine. Horses follow hounds, whose sense of smell enables them to follow the trail (or scent) of the fox at great speeds.

The sport can be traced back almost three millennia, to the time of the Assyrians. Hounds were bred for stag hunting in the eighth century by the French nobility and were imported to England by the French after the Norman Conquest of 1066. By the end of the 17th century, fox hunting had replaced stag hunting in England, and foxes have been chased ever since.

According to "Foxhunting in North America," by Alexander Mackay-Smith, the first mention of fox hunting in this country came in the 18th century, in parts of Virginia and in Chestertown, Md., where local planters imported red foxes from England. George Washington, who was an avid fox hunter on his Mount Vernon plantation, kept the best surviving record of American fox hunting during the 18th century.

Members of hunts in the United States and Canada will tell you that "the pursuit" here means to chase and not to kill, while in England, where animal-rights groups are trying to outlaw the sport, the objective is to kill.

"Our fun is in the chase," Mr. Colley said. "Why would we want to kill the fox? We would have nothing to chase tomorrow."

The Fox Is No Plodder

In fact, during most hunts, a fox is never caught. The reason: the fox outsmarts the hounds, or the huntsmen, the people controlling the hounds in the field, call them off, using horn signals, before they can kill the fox.

But it would be unrealistic to say a fox is never killed, though there are no statistics in the United States saying how many. In England, the figure is estimated at 20,000 a year by Alastair Jackson, author of "The Great Hunts."

"The unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable," wrote Oscar Wilde of fox hunting.

Animal-rights groups are upset that the sport still exists.

"It's disgusting," said Helen Jones, president of the International Society for Animal Rights in Clarks Summit, Pa. "People will look back on this and think, 'How barbarian.' "

Ms. Jones said she had never witnessed a fox hunt. "They claim they don't kill the fox," she said. "It's enough to make them drop dead of a heart attack when the dogs pursue them in their den."

While animal-rights groups condemn the sport in the United States, protesters in England have also stepped up their campaign, , dispatching hunt saboteurs, called "sabs." These protesters cross the path of the hunt, making it extremely dangerous for the riders.

Hunt masters in this country are very aware of the disdain for hunting, and many are reluctant to call attention to their sport.

"We're all scared to death of those radical groups," said Dr. Howard Schare, the Master of the Foxhounds of the Smithtown Hunt, in Center Islip, L.I.

But the members of the Smithtown Hunt sometimes don't hunt foxes at all. They do what 19 out of the 171 organized clubs do: they hunt "drag," or the scent of fox urine, mixed with glycerin and sprinkled through the field with a cane or burlap bag about a half-hour before the hunt. There is no fox involved in the chase. Otherwise, drag hunting has the same rules as fox hunting.

The clubs buy the fox urine from farmers who raise foxes. Some animal-rights advocates say they find this practice acceptable, although they worry that the farms might be raising foxes for fur.

Some fox hunters seem rather elitist about drag hunting. They think of themselves as traditionalists and refuse to consider drag hunting as an option.

"You better not ask the Master if we drag hunt," said a woman who answered the phone at the Essex Fox Hounds Hunt in Peapack, N.J. (where Mrs. Onassis hunted). "It simply isn't done here."

Drag hunting has its own tradition, however: it dates back to 1603 in England, where it was used in areas that were too built up or subdivided to permit the hunting of wild foxes.

During a traditional fox hunt, no one knows where the fox will lead the hounds (the fox could lead them over a roadway, for example), while in a drag hunt the course is set in advance. Some fox hunters say that drag hunting is not as exciting, because the hunt is simply too controlled. Arguing that they are only there to chase the fox in any case, not to kill it, they question the need for a drag hunt unless adequate land is unavailable.

Land, in fact, is the key to organizing any hunt. "Basically, the landowners are everything," said Colonel Foster, the hunt association official in Virginia. To have an organized hunt, permission is needed from the property owners to allow what can be more than 100 horses and perhaps 50 hounds to cross their land at different times of day.

"We have a square dance for the local landowners," said Frank Gibbs, a dairy farmer who is a Master of the Foxhounds for the Spring Valley Hounds in Allamuchy, N.J. "We want to get to know everyone and keep them happy."

Some pieces of land have easements from the previous owners stating that the local hunt will always be allowed to go through the property, no matter who owns the land. In Millbrook, N.Y., one landowner tried to remove an easement that allows the Millbrook Hunt to pass through, but lost the case. The landowner has said he plans to appeal.

Despite such complications, fox hunting remains a passion for some. In the Colleys' house alone, the china, the prints on the walls, the mirrors, even little statues and picture frames all have fox, hound and hunting motifs. Some women who fox-hunt carry little pocketbooks with hunt scenes and wear crystalline foxhead rings.

"You meet people from all walks of life," said Leslie Campbell of Middleburg, Va., who started fox-hunting two years ago.

"I did it once and it became addictive," she said. "It's a wonderful way to see beautiful country and meet all sorts of people you would never normally meet. You can hunt with a farmer, a businessman or a prince."

Huntsman and His Horn

Indeed, the exhilaration of a ride through the country on a horse chasing hounds that are following a scent may be something like skiing down a mountain with a group of friends.

The hunt starts like this:

The fox hunters, dressed as if they were in old England, gather outside in a field surrounded by woods. Feeling the wind on their cheeks, they stroke their horses and chat them up a bit.

The group is anticipating the sport of the day: what will the terrain be like? Will there be a lot of creek crossings or high fences? Will their horses stay calm or get caught up in competing with the others?

Everyone faces the Huntsman, who controls the hounds. The Master makes announcements about where the next meeting will be and who the visiting guests are on today's hunt.

Then, the Huntsman blows his horn, informing the hounds that the group is moving off. And the riders start hoping their horses will follow their commands.

They're off.

In a mad rush of color and sound, with the Huntsman crying, "Oy, oy, oy, oy!" to urge on the hounds, a variation on the old English "Yoicks!," each fox hunter tries to ride to some position in the "field," fox hunting lingo for the pack of riders. Trotting along, everyone waits for the hounds to pick up a scent. (Experienced hunters know the voices of the hounds and the horn calls of the Huntsmen.)

After the hounds find the scent, everyone takes off at once. Sitting deep in their saddles, the riders strive to keep up: they don't want to get lost. They look up for the jumps, down to avoid the holes in the ground and around to make sure the other hunters aren't having trouble with the jumps (not everyone on a hunt is an expert rider).

It's an adventure. Riders try to stay in control of their horses, to keep up with the field, waiting for a break (a checkpoint) so they can stop for a moment to catch their breath after galloping for an hour. After several hours, the hunt ends and the riders walk their horses back to the original meeting place. Many of them feel as if they have just jogged 14 miles.

Colonel Foster describes the hunt like this: "I equate it to a theater. Mother Nature's theater. You're sitting on this wonderful creature called a horse and you're watching this chase through nature's beautiful scenery, but you never see the same act twice."

And if you have a problem about chasing a fox, even Mr. Mackay-Smith, the sport's leading authority and the author of five books on the subject, says "drag hunting is an acceptable substitute."

A Few Things a Beginner Ought to Know

If you want to try fox hunting, the first thing to do is call the secretary of a nearby hunt. But you must know how to ride. "Would you ski the top of Lake Placid without knowing how to ski?" asked Eugene Colley of the Golden's Bridge Hounds Hunt in North Salem, N.Y.

The secretary can also advise you if there is a local farm that rents horses for the day.

If you request to try out the hunt, the secretary will put you in touch with the Master of the Foxhounds or make arrangements for you to ride with the hunt for a daily capping fee, usually about \$25 to \$75.

Some hunts will ask you to ride three or four times before allowing you to join. This is a way for the members to check you out, while you check them out. Familiarize yourself with the pecking order of the hunt, the proper dress and the protocol. The best booklet to consult is "Riding to Hounds in America: An Introduction for Foxhunters," by William P. Wadsworth. It can be ordered by calling The Chronicle of the Horse magazine at (703) 687-6341; its price is \$2.50. Every hunt is organized differently, but the ranking basically goes like this, according to "Riding to Hounds in America":

The Master of the Foxhounds is the head of the hunt: his or her word is final in the field and in the kennels. The Huntsman is hired by the Master. He controls the hounds, signaling to them by movements of his horse where to search for the fox.

The field, the fox hunter's word for the pack of riders, is controlled by a Field Master, who is responsible for making sure that the field does not interfere with the hounds and that it avoids damaging the land. If you're not a confident rider, you can do what is called "hill topping." Hill toppers follow the hunt on horseback at a distance in such a way as not to interfere. And they don't have to go over the jumps. You may also ask someone in the hunt to take you out in the field one day, just to get the feel of the terrain. You can offer to pay by the day for the service.

There is a strict dress code for the hunt. (Unless you are a staff member or a Master, you have to earn the right to wear a scarlet coat or the colors of the hunt.) A good catalogue is Horse Country out of Warrenton, Va. (1-800-882-HUNT).

Where to Find Hunt Clubs in the Region

Here are the 15 hunt clubs in the three-state region. Clubs that drag hunt, rather than hunt with a fox, are indicated in parentheses.

Connecticut

FAIRFIELD COUNTY HOUNDS, 155 Botsford Hill Road, Bridgewater, 06752. Established 1924. Information: (203) 661-4037.

LITCHFIELD COUNTY HOUNDS, 156 Still Hill Road, Bethlehem, 06751. Established 1930. Information: (203) 266-7502.

New Jersey

AMWELL VALLEY HOUNDS, 290 Rileyville Road, Hopewell, 08525. Established 1960. Information: (609) 466-0933.

ESSEX FOX HOUNDS, Peapack, 07977. Established 1912. Information: (908) 234-9126.

MONMOUTH COUNTY HUNT, 50 East Branch Road, Allentown, 08501. Established 1885. Information: (908) 431-7675.

SPRING VALLEY HOUNDS, Box 207, Allamuchy, 07820. Established 1915. Information: (201) 377-5668. (Drag hunt.)

New York State

GENESEE VALLEY HUNT, 3899 Huston Road, Geneseo, 14454. Established 1876. Information: (716) 243-3949. GOLDEN'S BRIDGE HOUNDS, Baxter Road, North Salem, 10560. Established 1924. Information: (914) 669-5021.

HOPPER HILLS HUNT, 1707 Murray Road, Victor, 14564. Established 1971. Information: (716) 924-5436.

LIMESTONE CREEK HUNT, Limestone Plaza, Fayetteville, 13066. Established 1939. Information: (315) 662-7670. (Drag hunt.)

MILLBROOK HUNT, Millbrook, 12545. Established 1907. Information: (914) 677-8006.

OLD CHATHAM HUNT, Old Chatham, 12136. Established 1926. Information: (914) 234-7022.

ROMBOUT HUNT, Hollow Road, Staatsburg, 12580. Established 1929. Information: (914) 635-8442.

SMITHTOWN HUNT, 12 Serene Court, Dix Hills, L.I. 11746. Established 1900. Information: (516) 462-1749. (Drag hunt.) WINDY HOLLOW HUNT, 227 Fort Van Tyle Road, RD 2, Box 227, Port Jervis, 12771. Established 1963. Information: (914) 986-3073.