

First Days Out: A rookie huntsman's first year



“Curb your enthusiasm”—that’s what our MFH said to me after last Sunday’s hunt. But I couldn’t. To every staff member, every rider in the field who walked by the kennel truck on their way back to the trailers and said “Thank you—it was a great day!” I couldn’t help but respond “It was, wasn’t it? Thanks so much for coming out!”

Let me explain. I am the brand new kennel huntsman for Green Mountain Hounds in Vermont. I became kennelman by choice. I became huntsman by circumstance. Though it was apparently part of our MFH’s plan— get me started as kennelman by moving the hounds from her old, failing kennels to my farm, then slowly develop my skills as huntsman by riding with her more often, taking hounds out at walk with me holding the horn, and generally making a smooth transition for herself, me and most importantly the hounds. Then she broke her leg....

The stories you will read here are all about my first year as huntsman and kennelman. I hope you enjoy these adventures.

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First Days Out: A Brief Who's Who in the Hunt Field--Part 1



I started fox hunting only four years ago. I began knowing very little--only as much as I had needed from the Pony Club manual to help the club's members learn a bit about this sport, which is the foundation of all of Pony Club.

The cast of characters was confusing at first, and even to this day, when one person may play several roles in the same Hunt Club, I sometimes can't figure out how to address people or situations.

So let me break it down. There are several main positions in a hunt:

Master of Foxhounds (or MFH)

Huntsman (Sorry, I will use the term "man" instead of some meaningless, politically correct generic term. For the purposes of this blog, let's assume "man" refers to "human" rather than male, okay?)

Whipper-In or Whip

Field Masters

Secretary

Kennelman

The "Fox" (In our case it is the two-legged kind without whom we would have nothing to do but stand around)

Any person may hold more than one of these positions either simultaneously or day to day. And who is the most important person out there? Well, you may actually never see these particular people, or they may be hiding in the field, either as a member or staff. Without question, the

Who's who part 1 The Masters



Where are we hunting? Who should I follow? What if I have questions? Where in the field should I ride?

Knowing the cast of characters in a hunt is not only helpful in getting the answers to these and many more questions; it is imperative to know the jobs and their meanings so you will remain a welcome member or guest as opposed to not being asked back!

Master of Foxhounds (MFH): According to Lt. Col. Dennis J. Foster in his excellent piece, *Our Sport: The Hows and Whys of Foxhunting*, “In all types of hunts, it’s the *Master* who is responsible for the day’s sport and makes the decisions. The Master calls upon the owners over whose property the hunt rides. They supervise the hound breeding program, schedule the hunt meet locations and appoint the hunt staff members who work for them. If they do not hunt the hounds themselves, they appoint a huntsman, who is sometimes a professional. Most hunts have more than one Master to share these responsibilities. No matter what the arrangement, all of a hunt’s Masters are always treated with the utmost respect and courtesy. They have absolute authority over the day’s hunting.”

In simple words—no Master, no hunt club.

Sometimes staff may have multiple roles. For instance, a Master may also be the Huntsman, or may lead the Field, or may be a whipper-in. A whipper-in may also be called upon to lead fields, or to be secretary.

Next time, the Huntsman.

--Going Home...

Where did all these dogs come from??

When foxhunting, always remember one thing—THOSE ARE HOUNDS—not “dogs.” Really, it’s important.

Foxhunting is a canine sport. Yes, you probably thought it was all about the horses, but really—they are the means by which staff and riders can keep up and traverse the territory in any way close to how the hounds can! They are fast, intent on their job, and can go almost anywhere!

So who’s in charge of all those hounds? The Huntsman, of course.

(*Note: many of the terms this blog will use the suffix “-man.” Let’s just agree that this stands for human and not male, okay?)

The huntsman is the person who actually is responsible for hunting the hounds, including which hounds to bring out on any given day, which portions of a territory to look for quarry, when to move the pack, and when to finish the day. Huntsmen care for, train and hunt the pack. They know their names, voices and habits. The hounds respond to the huntsman’s horn, his body position, and his horse.

The huntsman uses his horn to communicate with hounds, staff and the field.

Riders should always give the right of way to staff and hounds, so when you here the request “Staff, please” or “Hounds, please” get clear of the path as quickly as you can, turning your horse’s kicking end away from the action.

The Huntsman has a tough job: he must provide excellent care for the hounds, and good sport for the riders. It’s best to leave the huntsman to his job and save your praise of a good day out for after the hounds are in!





First Days Out: The Whipper-In

Cute name, huh? Big job, for sure!

The “whips” are the assistants to the huntsman. They are the ones who ensure hounds do not get into trouble. They are the first and last line of protection. They may guard the limits of a territory so that hounds don’t go onto land where they are not supposed to be, they make sure hounds are true to the huntsman’s chosen line or quarry, and they make sure that all hounds are accounted for—that no one is missing—and if a hound is not there, they will report it and find that hound!

A huntsman can only be in one place. The whips are extra ears, eyes and voice to ensure the success of the hunt and the safety and good behavior of the hounds. Their job is to: be in the right place at the right time; never interfere with hounds or huntsman (except of course when necessary to head hounds off a bad line or keep them safe); and to always know what the huntsman wants without being told, yet never out-think the huntsman. Sound impossible? Certainly it is!

As a whipper-in, I longed for those days when—though it may seem boring to the average rider of field member—almost nothing happens. Even if I am off by myself guarding a perimeter that is never challenged, and then I am called in as a day’s successful hunting is complete. I’ve had the most wonderful talks with my horse.

There is no way to describe the feeling of galloping as fast as you can through beautiful country watching a pack of hound sin full cry, and getting to just the right spot to deter them from running off course. No better feeling than being the hero of the day who stopped a riot, or saved hounds from running toward a busy road. Or standing quietly on a hillside guarding your patch while enjoying a full panoramic view of the whole pack hot on the chase, with huntsman and a flowing field of horses following behind. But those are the gifts of time, patience, effort and errors.

Those days when hounds run off on their own game, or when all but one are accounted for at the end of the day, it is the responsibility of the whips to find them no matter how long it takes, how hard it is raining or snowing, or how little food will be left at the breakfast.* The countless hours out of season spent walking hounds on foot, aiding the kennelman in care, and learning territory by heart—every twist, turn and tree—these are the whip’s additional tasks. For those few who whip-in in order to see the action or achieve status or glory, well, all I can say is they are missing the point. Hopefully they will not be missing the hounds!

Now, as a new huntsman, I have such a deep appreciation for the job done by those whipping-in for me. And as a former whip, I can often see what the whips are thinking—whether they get what I am seeing as a larger picture or not, I understand why sometimes choices are made that may not in fact be for the best. My hat is off to all the whippers-in, and you have my deepest gratitude.

(*Any meal eaten after the hunt is called “breakfast,” going back to when hunts traditionally went out quite early in the day, and would be back to have breakfast, even if it was 3 o’clock in the afternoon)

#6 First Day's Out: Who's who part 4: Fieldmasters



What about all those people on horses following the hounds? That looks like F-U-N!!

And it is, seriously, bugs-in-your-teeth fun! The members of a

hunt—all the men, women and children riding out across the fields are the ones who make having a hunt club worthwhile and even at all possible! Our model, if you will remember, is of a subscription pack, where individuals pay a membership fee in order to ride out with the hounds. Those fees pay for the care and well-being of the hounds, the maintenance of the kennels, staff, and all the myriad things that go into keeping a hunt alive and well.

There are essentially two types of riders in the field: those that ride in order to hunt, and those that hunt in order to ride. Both are welcome, and each has its own perspective on hunting. More on that later....

But we do need someone to keep everyone in line, so to speak. Someone who knows the territory—the dangerous spots, bad footing, best fences and how to navigate a large group of riders in such a way that the activities of the staff and hounds are unimpeded. They know safe routes, correct protocols, and the likes, dislikes and needs of the huntsman.

And not every rider in the field can jump the jumps, or feels safe running fast. Or maybe their horse is young and inexperienced, or older and needs to take it easy over rough terrain. Hmm, sounds like we have two groups here, two “fields” of riders who need some guidance.

Enter the Fieldmasters! The Fieldmasters are the ones who will keep you on the right track. And they will make sure you stay there!

The First Fieldmaster has the all-important job of following the huntsman and hounds. Keeping up with the Huntsman, keeping them in sight and showing everyone a rollicking good time, while staying the heck out of the way is their mission. They know the territory, the rules of the road, what and where is safe and not, and all other useful information. So you don't need to know, you just need to follow your Fieldmaster.

Not ready to go all out chasing after huntsman and hounds? Then perhaps Second Field (or “flight”) is for you. No one knows territories better than Second Fieldmasters. They can cut corners, have a good instinct as to where the action will be, and try to get you there at a more modest pace—avoiding jumps and obstacles—in time to see the hounds in action. They'll get you out, show you a good time, and bring you back having had a great view, but with less mud in your teeth.

Who's who The Members

Our example hunt is a subscription pack, meaning that people who would like to hunt become members of the hunt club and pay a membership fee. The fees go toward maintaining hounds and kennels, fixtures, professional association dues, and a hundred other items a hunt must have to be recognized and well-run. Memberships are the primary source of income for a subscription pack, though additional fundraisers held throughout each year help in a big way, too.

So in essence, no members, no hunt club! We LOVE our members! And when we are out hunting hounds, we want to make sure everyone is having a good time enjoying this great sport. Most hunters agree there are two main kinds of members: those that ride to hunt, and those that hunt to ride.

Remember all those hounds? Remember that foxhunting is a “hound sport”? Well, folks that ride to hunt are seriously interested in what the hounds are doing, how they work, what they find and how well they run it. They know the way to keep up and see the action is to ride out with the hunt.

Those riders who really don't know what the hounds are doing are a part of it, too. They understand the value of being in good company on good horses getting to ride in areas they wouldn't normally have access to. They see speed, jumping, and the challenges of terrain. And they are right!

Members often volunteer for their clubs, because they know how much effort goes into maintaining hounds and fixtures. They staff at events held by the club, help walk out the hounds in non-hunting seasons, take puppies or retired hounds into their homes, build jumps, you name it! A hunt these days couldn't get along without their members, and members love to support the club that offers them such great sport and even greater camaraderie.

Hope to see you out this coming season!

Going home—



#8 First Days Out: HOUNDS! Part 1: The off season.

Yes, I am the huntsman, but my real title is “Kennel Huntsman” as I am both the huntsman and the caretaker of the hounds and kennels, aka the Kennelman or kennelmaster. As such, one of my duties is to ensure the health and well-being of the pack. And exercise is of paramount importance, not only for both mental and physical health, but also for training a pack to be, well, a pack. Hounds need exercise—lots of it.

I looked up the American Foxhound on five different websites. I was looking for a specific piece of information, which I couldn't find. But what I did notice—and it was made very clear on all the sites—was the specific instruction that Foxhounds should be regularly, vigorously exercised. They have been bred for centuries to hunt in the fields and woods. And that means run. And run. And run. They are also highly social and are most content within a pack. Yes, they can easily develop an affinity for curling up on your couch by the fire, but once outside, they will need to move!

Most hunts will go out from late summer/early fall through the end of March. Here in the chilly northeast, mounted hunting is not a winter activity. Ice, snow, rotten footing, no decent scent, and temperatures WAY below freezing sometimes for weeks. And in spring, the mud. Spring and summer is also the time to whelp puppies, and get things done around the kennels. For some drag hunts, a short spring season once things dry out is not unusual, ending before the weather gets too warm.

So what do we do during the non-hunting time?

Answer: we walk the hounds on foot, three times per week, minimum. The pros go every day. As hunting season approaches, we will take the hounds for exercise while mounted to get them going farther and at a faster pace than we can muster on foot. Some hunts use bicycles. I am not that good on a bicycle.

And yes, sometimes there are puppies!

Going home—

