

Foxhunting is a wonderful sport. Arriving at the meet one already senses an aura of quietly contained energy as old friends greet each other and go about readying their mounts for the day. When the first hound speaks, muscles tense and caps are adjusted in anticipation. There is nothing to compare with the full cry of the pack, the view-holloa of the Whipper-In, the shivering excitement of your horse as you let him begin to open up across country on a line that Charlie alone decides. The sound and feet of the galloping horses, the thrill, the danger of taking that unknown line across country at speed, the simple joy of being out in the countryside on a horse is a celebration of life. Foxhunting is a wonderful sport.

There are age-old traditions that bring the order and pageantry to the Hunt Field. Rules of conduct and dress are a vital part of our sport. A great day out with hounds does not come easily, particularly in today's world; and a few guidelines go a long way towards enhancing everyone's enjoyment. Here are some points I feel are important for every foxhunter to consider and urge them to embrace.

Proper tack and dress are important for a couple of reasons. First of all, every piece of hunt gear on both horse and rider is designed to facilitate a full day in the Hunt Field. Perhaps some of the materials could be out of date, but everything has a reason and is designed to work well. The timeless beauty of a Field of foxhunters is worth immeasurably more than the efficiency of a ski parka. I'm not a stickler, but I do feel the less correctly dressed riders should remain in the rear of the Field. I believe everyone in the Hunt Field ideally should wear spurs, carry a hunt whip with a thong, and have wire cutters on the saddle. The thong may be dropped to ward off the approach of a hound, but it should never be used otherwise unless requested by staff.

At the meet, say good morning to all the Masters and the Field Secretary: and remember always to introduce guests. I like to know who is out on any given day. You are responsible for your guest: Make sure they sign the waiver, pay the cap, are correctly turned out, and are properly mounted. Unless invited by the Field Master to ride up front, you should stay with your guest back a bit in the Field.

The Field Master may have the best spot in the Hunt Field, but it is a difficult job. He is responsible for both the safety and pleasure of the Field, and he is therefore preoccupied with observing the pack of hounds and deciding where to place the Field so as to not interfere with the Huntsman's work, yet showing off the sport to best advantage. The Field Master is charged with absolute power in the Hunt Field, and he may suspend the hunting privileges of individuals who jeopardize the safety and pleasure of the day's hunting. Members of the Field should not pass, ride ahead of the Field Master or interfere with his/her freedom of movement. Riding up with the Field Master is a privilege generally associated with seniority in the Hunt Field. As a rule, younger or newer members should always yield to more senior members but not to the detriment of the day. Saying this, if you cannot keep up with the Field Master, then no matter what your status is in the Hunt, you should give way to others regardless of age or seniority. The Field Master, Staff and Hounds always have the full right-of-way. If the Huntsman needs to bring the pack of hounds back through the Field, please give way and turn your horse's head towards the pack. This will prevent the hounds or huntsman from being kicked. If a hound is trying to get forward up though a moving Field, keep moving, but give him what room you can and cock your horse's head enough so that the horse can see the hound and not be surprised.

Having said that, everything else comes down to simple courtesy and common sense. We all want to have fun today, and tomorrow and tomorrow, so we have an obligation to hunt accordingly.

When hounds are drawing a covert or at a check, be quiet to minimize distraction. A continuously raucous group of foxhunters will require the Field Master to keep the Field far away from hounds.

When riding in the Field, one must be aware of the country being covered, the location of other riders, of their horses, and of hounds. One needs to maintain a “safety area”, while respecting other riders' “areas.” “Give a man room to fall” is a wise old adage. Do not cut off other riders or ride on their heels. Try to rate your speed so as not to surprise someone behind you. A good rule of thumb is to keep your horse one to four lengths from the horse in front of you; one at a walk and four at a gallop. The Field should stay together. Hilltoppers should, as a group, stay with their designated Field Master. If you cannot keep up with the first flight, drop back to the Hilltoppers after notifying the Master and remain there. If you need to leave the Hunt Field early, you should ask permission from the Field Master. He will give you permission to leave when he thinks you are least likely to interfere with sport. Wandering riders may disrupt the hunting by getting lost, leaving gates open, or trespassing. Landowners do not appreciate this.

The greener the horse or rider the further back in the Field they should remain. Kickers (displaying a red ribbon in the tail), unruly, or out of control horses should ride at the rear and may be sent home if they continue to be a problem. If your horse stops at a jump, you should allow the rest of the Field to go ahead before you attempt it again. If you think you might have a problem with a jump; stay in the back of the Field. If your horse quits at a jump a few times, it might behoove you to retire to the Hilltoppers. Horses usually stop when they are tired (or just tired of their rider), sore or scared – all of which are signs that you or your horse might get hurt if you continue to try to jump. If you get hurt, you will not only ruin your day of hunting, you will ruin the person(s) who will have to assist you (especially the Field Master, since he's the Doctor!) If you damage a jump, you must make temporary repairs and report it to the Field Master as soon as is prudent.

When in doubt, close the Gate! Farmers rarely are upset to find a gate closed that should have been open, but are livid when finding the opposite! Avoid riding across freshly sown cropland and lawns. Ride quietly past livestock.

When you leave a meet at the end of the day, try to leave it like you found it – No trash, loose hay or manure. It is bad manners to clean out your trailer in some else's field or parking lot.

We hunt for fun, not for “hunt politics.” I find it odd, but foxhunters are notoriously forgetful of this basic fact.

The cubbing or autumn hunting season in August and September distinguishes itself from the regular season in that it is not for the members, but for the hounds. It is a special and exciting time in the hunting year. The hounds must learn pack discipline and the puppies to hunt. Subscribers, once permission has been granted by the Masters, are welcome to observe and perhaps assist the huntsman while getting their new hunters accustomed to hounds and warming up the old ones to a new season. In November, the opening day of hunting season is a glorious, long-awaited occasion where a pack of foxhounds start six months of unequalled entertainment for the subscribers.

Sound good? Let's go hunting!