

## OUR REGION

by Charles Bonenti

# Following a Fox “Hunt”



Scenes from Old Chatham Hunt Club events. Photos by Mimi Forer Photography

**M**y first mistake was calling the foxhounds dogs. “They’re hounds,” I was reminded. My second was neglecting to wear high-top boots. My trouser legs got soaked in the dew-drenched field.

It was early morning of the day Keen Ice beat American Pharoah at Saratoga and I was joining the Old Chatham Hunt Club (OCHC) for an outing.

Having neither horse, nor attire, nor riding experience, I was observing from a jeep driven by club secretary Cynthia Buckley, who was acting as motor “whipper-in.” It was her task to keep radio tabs on the riders and dogs (pardon me, hounds), and intervene if they neared a trafficked road or got onto the wrong quarry—a deer, for example, instead of a fox or coyote. Intervening meant cracking her whip to distract the pack or to “scream like a mama” while running at them.

For nearly two hours we traversed a landscape of cornfields, pastures and woodlots off Goold Road in Valatie, hearing the far-off hunting horn and barking, and intersecting with the riders and hounds as they came to a road crossing. Otherwise, we parked, listened to radio communications and talked about modern-day fox hunting. Fox “chasing” or “spotting” is a more apt description since hunting to kill is no longer customary in the United States, Buckley told me.

The OCHC has about 200 members—a third of whom ride to the hounds. The rest follow beagles on foot in pursuit of rabbit or are social members largely retired from riding.

The club was organized as the Carroll Hunt in 1928 in New Lebanon, moving in 1930 to Old Chatham where it took its present name. It has no clubhouse, but maintains kennels, a stable, paddock and living quarters for kennel staff in Old Chatham.

There are 157 active hunt clubs in North America, according to the Masters of Foxhounds Association, the oldest of them in Virginia and all of them rooted in British tradition. The nearest to OCHC is in Millbrook.

I was an early arrival that morning, but found a white-clothed table already set up in the field, with port, sherry, plastic stirrup cups and store-bought pastries. It was not the Downton Abbey moment I envisioned with lackeys bearing silver cups to mounted riders in scarlet or black. This was an informal “cubbing” to train young hounds in hunting practice. Members arrived in casual summer attire—black helmets, green polo shirts, buff breeches and riding boots—towing their mounts in trailers. After unloading, they gathered to socialize.

For fall events, Buckley told me, riders switch to “rat catcher” attire—tweed jackets with white ties called

“stocks.” For the opening of hunt season Oct. 3, scarlet and black jackets are de rigueur.

Mostly middle-aged professionals—lawyers, educators, business owners, who live in the area or come for weekends—those I talked to dismissed the stereotype of fox hunting as an elitist blood sport. The fox is a wily creature, they said, and can easily elude hounds, which are called off once the fox tires and “goes to ground,” or takes to its den. Only prey in their natural environment are chased. None are raised to be released for sport.

For riders and horses alike, following the hounds is an exhilarating alternative to plodding around a rink or along familiar trails. Faith Jennings, 14, who has been riding since she was seven said, “It’s so good for the horse to run flat out. It’s an adrenalin rush!”

Jennings was among the youngest riders; the oldest were in their late 70s.

While all apply for membership and need approval by the board of directors, dedication and sportsmanship are valued more than blue blood and a big bank account.

“We don’t ask for financials or make you take a test,” joked Jef Murdock, one of three masters of the hunt. “The people are pleasant, down to earth and very welcoming.”



Still, it is a "high barrier sport" in skill and expense, he admitted, up there with sailing, skiing and polo. Annual club dues run \$1,900 per person or \$3,100 a family; less for junior categories. Then there's the cost of the horse, its upkeep, gear, a trailer and riding attire.

Hunt masters, who serve voluntarily for three years, are chosen by a selection committee to conduct the hunts. They are often major donors and most are men, although Pamela Cohen, who was riding that day, served as an OCHC master, as did her grandmother, Marion Wiggins Cox, whose husband, W. Gordon Cox, was a club founder.

Mounts can be thoroughbreds, percherons, appaloosas, even ponies, Buckley told me. The temperament to be safe, good hunters, and at ease with other horses and a pack of hounds counts more than breed.

The course is typically set up with three fields, each led by a field master. The toughest has riders moving at a brisk pace and taking jumps. The others are less challenging for those who prefer to go slower. Nearly 30 riders were out that day along with 20 hounds, but there have been up to 55 on horseback.

They work as one, with hounds in the lead following a scent, the huntsman controlling the pack with vocal and horn calls, and everyone else trying to keep up. One compared it to pursuing a jigsaw puzzle through the landscape.

The club has agreements to cross some 200 properties and maintains horse trails through woodlands. Heavy rain can cancel an event, as can icy ground. There have been falls and injuries, but no fatalities, I was told.

Huntsman Tom Hopkins, with 47 years of riding under his belt, has been in charge of the pack for a year.

"I love the hounds; I love them. And they love me!" he shouted. Hopkins trains and cares for the pack, with the help of a kennel assistant. He walks them every day and teaches them to respond to his vocal and horn calls.

I saw him assemble them into tight formation by a roadside as cars passed by. Each wears a GPS collar so it can be located if it goes astray. Each also has a name, but they are not treated as pets. They are working dogs, bred for fox hunting by the clubs themselves.

Young ones learn from the older, Hopkins told me, "but I become the alpha figure. They pay attention and do what I ask."

After seven or eight years hunting, they "earn their place by the hearth," he said, and are "adopted out" to live in leisure and, perhaps, dream of chasing foxes through the fields. 🐾

Old Chatham Hunt Club, (518) 766-4340, [www.oldchathamhuntclub.com](http://www.oldchathamhuntclub.com)

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