

## A' Hunting We Go

Riding to Hounds: one of America's most undiscovered equestrian sports.

by Summer Best

The foxhounds were exhausted. After a 5-mile dash through the covert, jumping logs, careening around trees and brush, wading through puddles and dodging holes, the muddy, panting hounds walked softly around their huntsman as they cooled off. The scent – which was that of a coyote – had been strong. The chase had been fast. Daphne and Marty

Popular?

Foxhunting is colorful, fast and furious, technical and specialized. It's also perhaps the most misunderstood and mis-publicized equestrian activity in America. If foxhunting is mentioned in your local newspaper or on T.V., it's typically only a brief notice of happenings in Europe or some select communities in the Northeast. But did you know – organized foxhunting in the United States is alive and well from coast to coast? To participate in an organized hunt, you don't have to be rich and famous or born of royalty.

Then Again...

Foxhunts are not for everyone. They are not for weak riders or unfit horses. They are not for cowards. They are not for late sleepers or troublemakers or individualists or for those with little endurance or poor balance. Whiners need not apply.

Foxhunts are for team players and for somewhat nimble, knowledgeable horsemen and women. They are for responsible citizens who love and hold dear traditions, land and wildlife. Indeed, foxhunts are also for adrenaline junkies who love a good chase through the woods! And, as all individuals who have earned their hunt's colors will tell you, foxhunts welcome only good and decent people. Lawbreaking, recklessness and dangerous riding are simply not permissible.

"We have all sorts of people on our hunt," says Daphne Wood, who, along with her husband, C. Martin Wood, founded the prestigious Live Oak Hounds in Monticello, Florida, 30 years ago. Foxhunters from around the world consider it a privilege to hunt with the Live Oak Hounds, thanks to the hunt's incredible organization, the vast amount of land available to them and also their very biddable (well-trained, attentive and talented) hounds. Marty and Daphne are the joint-masters of foxhounds of Live Oak Hounds.

"We have school teachers and housewives, young people and older people," Daphne says. "Our main requirement is that you must be considered safe if you hunt here."

Professional, lawyers, doctors, businessmen, and housewives, young people and older people.

#### Marty on the hunt

Being “safe” on a hunt means wearing protective headgear, riding carefully and attentively, and riding a horse that is fit and solid enough for anything that might come your way on the field. Accidents are rare, but they are a reality. A tree branch could snap back and injure you, your horse could fall or step in a hole or become startled, or any number of unfortunate misfortunes could occur as you and your horse gallop after fast wildlife. So when a joint-master of a hunt refers to being “safe,” it’s not taken lightly.

Many hunts provide a caravan of vehicles that follow along as closely as possible to the field. People who are curious about foxhunting often ride along in this vehicle for their first hunt. The time is used to watch the activity on the field, take photographs and to decide if they are ready to participate with their own horses.

#### The Fox

Foxhunting in America dates back to Colonial times, and President George Washington was one of the first Americans to record hunt information in his diaries. Today, hunting means hunting the quarry in its wild and natural state. Sometimes hounds catch a fox on a hunt, but most times they don’t. Foxes tend to run in circles, almost as if they are teasing the hounds. If a fox runs underground or up a tree, it is left alone.

On some hunts, hounds will catch the scent of a coyote or bobcat, and the chase is entirely different.

Coyotes typically run fast and straight, which makes for a long, hard gallop!

Some hunts are blank, due to atmospheric conditions producing poor scenting for the hounds.

“You can have the greatest pack of hounds, the most beautiful country full of game, and a wonderful field of mounted riders on horses, but if the Good Lord provides no scent, we have what we call a hellish day in paradise,” Marty says.

#### The HoundsMarty with the hounds

Foxhounds have been bred for centuries to hunt, and the Live Oak Hounds are the pride and joy of Marty Wood, who is huntsman of the pack and also an esteemed judge of the breed and an expert on the Foxhound

Kennel Stud Book. Currently, Marty's pack contains about 110 hounds, but only about half of those will hunt together at one time, in order to provide rest in between hunts. The Live Oak Hounds are celebrated for being biddable, and in the field, they carefully obey the huntsman and whippers-in (special riders who keep hounds from straying onto dangerous roads or out of approved hunting lands).

"Hounds are Daphne and Marty's main interest in life," says Dennis Foster, Executive Director of the Masters of Foxhounds Association, which is the nearly 100-year-old governing body of organized fox, coyote and drag hunting in the U.S. and Canada. "They have some of the finest hounds the world."

Foxhound pedigrees are maintained with diligence by the Foxhound Kennel Stud Book. Many have said that this book is as carefully recorded as the Jockey Club's Stud Book for Thoroughbred horses.

#### Joint-Masters of Foxhounds

Daphne Wood is currently President of the Masters of Foxhounds Association, and she is the first woman to hold the presidential title of the esteemed organization. According to Dennis Foster, Daphne is "A remarkable lady. She is a very prolific writer on hunting subjects and a great speaker – but she maintains a low profile."

Marty Wood is also a past president of the group, which oversees 171 organized hunts in the U.S. The MFHA oversees organized hunts, handles any disputes between hunts, maintains the Foxhound Kennel Stud Book and preserves, encourages and improves the sport of foxhunting. Marty is also the executive trustee of the hunt staff benefit foundation and the president of the MFHA Education Foundation.

Neither Daphne nor Marty Wood was born into a family of foxhunters. In fact, the duo didn't foxhunt at all until they reached their 20s. In the past 30 years, however, they've become identified as knowledgeable and accomplished Masters of Foxhounds.

"They go to such great measures to make everything complete," says Norm Fine, editor of *Covertside*, the official publication of the Masters of Foxhounds Association. "Daphne and Marty leave no stone unturned in their efforts to keep the sport exact and true to its roots."

Daphne and Marty's passion for foxhunting merge perfectly: Marty is an astute expert in breeding foxhounds, and Daphne has a sharp eye and decades of experience evaluating, breeding and finding great field hunters.

fox hunts in the area

“Horses love to hunt,” Daphne says. “They never tire of it. In other disciplines, horses might sometimes become ring sour or stop enjoying their jobs, but a horse always loves to hunt. It’s exciting and it’s fun.” Despite the fact that Marty is an accomplished hunter of many varieties of wild game, he notes that foxhunting is the one pastime he never wavers from.

“Foxhunting is like nothing else,” he says, stealing a quick glance at his wife. “I love foxhunting more than anything – except, of course, my wife.”

### Love of the Land

Traditions run deep in Monticello, near the Florida-Georgia border, the home base for Live Oak Hounds. Three to four days each week, from August through mid-March, the Live Oak Hounds hunt on the outskirts of Tallahassee. Thanks largely to the Woods’ dedication to land conservation, and also thanks to the generosity of many property owners in the area, approximately 150,000 acres of land is available for Live Oak Hounds to hunt. Live Oak Hounds does not take this privilege for granted – the group works hard to respect the rights of each land owner.

“If we don’t work hard now to conserve these lands, which are sensitive environments, they will be developed, and a lot of species could become extinct,” Daphne says.

Since 1992, Daphne has been secretary of Tall Timbers Research Station, a land conservation trust that protects the Red Hills and the Live Oak’s hunt country from encroaching development. She’s been involved with this organization, along with Marty, since 1980, and their involvement has helped obtain the conservation easements that are leaving an indelible mark of goodwill. Thanks to their efforts, not only will foxhunting have a future in North Florida and South Georgia, but generations of people will have the opportunity to enjoy the rare beauty of undeveloped land roughly 30 miles outside Florida’s state capital.

Summer Best, editor of *ec* magazine, was privileged to hunt with the Live Oak Hounds in February. After just one hunt, she is hooked!

### Feeding the Foxhunters

When it comes to her horses, Daphne Wood doesn’t miss much. They drop weight? She notices. Have a lackluster coat? Oh, boy – she’s quick to improve it.

“Well, there’s no reason for the horses to look bad,” she says. “You’ve

seen what we ask them to do for us when we're hunting. They're hardworking horses. And we've found with Seminole Feed the horses always do well and look great. Our favorite feed is [Seminole] Gold Chance 12. We switched one time to another feed company, and within weeks, the horses had dropped a lot of weight and looked terrible. You always end up feeding less when you feed Seminole Feed because it's better feed, so you end up saving money."

The walking horses and mules, which the family uses for quail shooting, thrive on Seminole Leisure 10, which gives just enough balanced energy and calories for their less-active lifestyles.

Piper Parrish, barn manager at Live Oak Hounds, oversees all the horses' day-to-day care and training. With Marty and Daphne Wood, and all staff members riding hard three days a week, Piper is responsible for keeping everyone supplied with a good, fresh horse.

"We finish the season with 18 foxhunters," Piper says. "That's so we can keep six people mounted every time the hounds walk out the door. Our turn-over of horses here is small. We really try to make every horse work out, and Miss Daphne just loves them all!"

Live Oak foxhunting horses are turned out after their daily exercise to eat grass in paddocks (turned out during the daytime in winter, and out at night in summer), and all are body clipped (except for their legs), requiring them to wear winter blankets in cold weather. Body clipping is necessary to enable the horses to gallop long distances while hunting without overheating. Legs are left unclipped to protect them from briars, sticks and mud.

Parrish provides free-choice coastal hay to every horse.

"They have hay 24/7," she says. "All the time."

Horses also have free-choice access to grass balancer mineral, which is provided in an extra bucket in their stalls and in mineral blocks in each pasture. And during hunting season, all hunters receive electrolytes as a top-dressing on their feed. Select Nu-Flex Maximizer joint supplement is given to several older horses, and McCauley Bros. BIOTIME is added to the feed of some horses for improved hoof condition.

Live Oak Hounds also breeds several mares each year, extending their family of foxhunting horses each year.