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Devoted to the Chase

BY CHALMERS POSTON - GEORGIA - FALL 07

Opening day of Georgia's famed Belle Meade Hunt

For all sports, opening day is special. There's the thrill and anticipation of a new season, and the enjoyment of friends not seen since the last season ended. There's the eternal hope that this season will be the one that brings home the championship trophy, produces the record-setting performance, or bags the trophy game. The season that is remembered forever.

And so, on the first Saturday in November, I find myself in a state of nervous anticipation, towing a two-horse trailer in Thomson, Georgia, on the opening day of the Belle Meade Hunt, a foxhunt with an almost mythic reputation for its devotion to the chase. Despite existing a mere forty years, Belle Meade hosts what is likely the largest opening day meet of any foxhunt in the world. Yes — the world. A hundred or so riders from more than fifteen states converge with more than five hundred partying supporters to create a uniquely Southern version of opening day for a sport that started in England some four hundred years ago.

Americans have been hunting with hounds since the days of Washington and Jefferson, both avid foxhunters who possessed their own hound packs. But modern American foxhunting is quite different from the English cousin from which it spawned. Indeed, in America the modern sport should be called a fox chase: The purpose is not to kill the fox, but to chase it until it "goes to ground" by burrowing in a den, scaling a tree, or being otherwise "accounted for." As such, the American version has not traditionally been a blood sport. In the case of today's hunt, which is designed as an exhibition for the hundreds of non-mounted spectators following in tally-ho wagons, Belle Meade's hounds will not even be chasing a live fox or coyote, but only the scent of one laid out on a dragline in a scented bag dragged over a predetermined course.

As I step out of the truck at the Belle Meade stables on this crisp fall morning, the excitement is palpable. My senses are assaulted. Conversation mingles with the cacophony of baying hounds and whinnying horses. I smell leather at play with sweat, red clay, sherry, unwashed hound, and washed horse. And stretching before my eyes in every direction is some of the finest foxhunting land in the world.

Like golf, which, native to the British Isles, has one of its holiest cathedrals at Augusta National Golf Club, just thirty miles away, foxhunting is being perfected here, on the red clay of southeastern Georgia, on these 35,000 contiguous acres of rolling hills, open fields, forests, creeks, and streams. And what a cathedral to horse and hound this is. The land's red clay holds animal scents longer than sand or dirt, providing some of the best scenting conditions for foxhounds in America. It's also perfect habitat for fox and coyote, with coyote, now the larger, stronger, faster predator, being the primary quarry.

And just as Augusta National is famous for the immaculate conditioning of its grounds, Belle Meade is known for its substantial efforts to safeguard the land on which the hunt unfolds, encouraging habitat for both fox and coyote and safe hunting conditions for its members. Since the hunt takes place primarily by concession of private landowners, Belle Meade's care for the land is essential to the hunt's success and survival. And in exchange for its efforts — and for the many hours of maintenance put in by members of the hunt, who are fined if they miss work parties — Belle Meade enjoys vast territory on which horses and

hounds can run faster, harder, longer, and safer than just about any other foxhunt anywhere. Some of the other one hundred and seventy-one active foxhunts in America may have superior individual pieces of the foxhunt puzzle, but it's hard to imagine that any have Belle Meade's perfect combination of land, climate, habitat, hound, and staff.

After looking over the stunning scenery and checking on the horses in my trailer, I head in to the Belle Meade clubhouse for a typical Southern buffet breakfast. Eggs, sausage, cheese grits — everything that keeps the local cardiologists busy. But we all need the nourishment — the riders burning calories, and the non-riders celebrating in the tally-ho wagons. After breakfast it's time to mount up. I admit I'm a tad nervous: It's opening day for both rider and horse; we're riding in a hunt known for running long, hard, and fast in front of hundreds of people; and my horse is not exactly a bullet-proof ride.

Frik Frak is a young Thoroughbred, a breed common in foxhunting for its speed, endurance, and athletic ability, necessary qualities to keep up with hounds on scent and to clear obstacles along the way. But like most Thoroughbreds in America, he's a racetrack washout, so he's fast but not quite fast enough to win consistently. And, as is the case with most things in life, what the Lord giveth the Thoroughbred in speed, grace, and athleticism, He also taketh in mental abilities. Not that Thoroughbreds are dumb; to the contrary, they are quite clever. But Thoroughbreds are what horsemen call a hot-blooded breed, meaning they are excitable, spook easily, and often act erratically for no apparent reason. I once heard an old Gullah woman on Hilton Head Island say her husband was crazy because "he sees haints [ghosts] where the haints ain't." While I can agree with Frik Frak that haints are likely to reside under bridges and in certain ditches, Frik Frak frequently finds haints where haints ain't.

The challenge with Thoroughbreds is to harness their speed, grace, and athletic ability without provoking their excitable nature, always lurking just below the surface. An apt comparison to a Thoroughbred is a Ferrari: When it's running well, it's a great ride, performing better the faster you go. But if you're not careful, the temperamental nature of the car can easily propel you into a nearby tree. So, imagine, for sport, greasing the seat and steering wheel of the Ferrari, and you find yourself about where I am: aboard a young, edgy, greased-up, ex-racetrack Ferrari that sees haints where they ain't. My nervousness is understandable. So far so good, though: We've got glistening tack, polished boots, and washed horse all ready to go, and Frik Frak isn't too jumpy, taking in all the sights and sounds while standing reasonably still.

As is traditional on the opening day of most foxhunts, the meet starts with a blessing of horse and hound. On this day, riders and their horses line up in a giant V on both sides of the podium. Then, surrounded by five hundred or so onlookers, and aided by his staff, Epp Wilson, a gregarious second-generation huntsman and master of foxhounds, brings the hounds dramatically into the assembled throng of horse and humanity by clearing a jump in a fence line and calling them to the middle of the field. Epp has been Belle Meade's huntsman for twenty years, capably directing the hounds during the course of the hunt by use of a horn and of mounted assistants known as whippers-in. After dismounting, Epp and his fellow masters walk forward to present the hounds to the Reverend E.R. Frank for the blessing.

Father Frank, a member of the Belle Meade Hunt, has been performing the ceremony since the beginning, forty-one years ago, and, in years past, as soon as he finished the ceremony he would substitute his clerical garb for a scarlet coat and hop aboard his horse to join the chase. During Belle Meade's ceremony each rider steps forward to receive a Saint Hubert medal — Saint Hubert being the patron saint of hunters. While I wait in line for Frik Frak's personal blessing, a lovely young woman hands me a glass of port, foxhunting's traditional libation. Perfect. Frik Frak gets a blessing from a heavenly spirit and I get some bravado from an earthly one. We are both pleased. Then, with a blow from Master Wilson's horn, the hounds gather and off we go.

Hounds, staff, and field riders head out followed by tally-ho wagons, each filled to the brim with spectators — Thomson townfolk who come every year and out-of-towners in just for

this day. After crossing a road, we enter the largest pecan grove I've ever seen. A hundred years ago it was planted with pecan and peach trees, with three rows of peach trees preceded and followed by a row of pecan trees, and so forth. Eighty years later the peach trees died, leaving behind a stunning grove of huge, century-old pecans. We pause among the pecans for a few moments to let the wagon followers set up in an adjoining field, then Epp Wilson casts the hounds off near a dragline. They quickly pick up the scent and take off in a loud cry in full view of the assembled wagons.

Now, while Saint Hubert may protect Friek Frak from his ever-lurking evil haints, he's of little assistance in helping my racetrack reject forget what he learned in his formative years — that when horses are running ahead of him, it's his job to pass them. Thus, when we finally get moving and clear a jump out of the pecan grove and into an open field, Friek Frak sees in front of him a few big, clunky, draft-type horses — what looks to him like an easy victory. Of his own volition, he quickly shifts his Ferrari engine to a higher gear and pulls even with one of the minivan-looking draft horses. With our sudden forward momentum, we pass the horse in front of us in a split second, and Friek Frak is pleased. I, however, am not: while such passing speed is praised on the racetrack, it is very bad foxhunt etiquette.

With Friek Frak, each day renews a long-standing discussion over who's going to be the managing partner in our human-equine partnership. So far today, all bristling with confidence from his blessing by Father Frank, bolstered by his early knowledge that he's supposed to run faster than all horses ahead of him, and with his eye on a cute little chestnut mare just ahead, Friek Frak is pretty sure that it is his day to be boss. But I, full of port, and with more years of riding experience than he has years alive, disagree. So, at a full gallop, and with hundreds watching, Friek Frak and I begin an intimate discussion over what we're doing, where we're going, and at what speed. I talk to him through my weight, legs, and body position, and add in a few half-halts on the reins for good measure. I am not too subtle. Friek Frak thinks I'm crazy, as he knows we have horses in front of us and that he can take them, but after a dispiriting half minute the insistence of my aids starts to pay off. Reluctantly he relents and shortens his stride; he collects himself and we pull in a few horse-lengths behind the cute mare, just in time to make a sharp turn, stride twice, and clear a fence beautifully. Suddenly my horse has an epiphany of sorts, breaking from his racetrack-inspired youth and realizing that today we are jumping — and that he doesn't know where the jumps are, and that perhaps he would be better off listening. Friek Frak is becoming a foxhunter, and a good one at that, taking, on the four exhibition runs of the day, all that Belle Meade has to offer. We go up and down hills, through open fields, across creeks, and into tight pine forests, all at a full gallop and with jumps along the way. He is fantastic.

After more than five hours of galloping and jumping, and waiting for the tally-ho wagons to reposition, we arrive, tired and dirty, at the top of an open hill just as the sun is starting to set. After thanking Saint Hubert for keeping Friek Frak's evil haints away for the day, I take notice of the gracious extravagance of champagne and hors d'oeuvres laid out on aptly named Champagne Hill. As I dismount Friek Frak, an Atlanta couple who had been riding in one of the tally-ho wagons come over to say that they watched us all day and thought that Friek Frak was one of the best horses in the field. I chuckle proudly. Saint Hubert must have put them up to that.

In some sports, the goal is not a statistic or an award, but a mere sense of accomplishment, a feeling of being part of something special. In foxhunting, the accomplishment is being a partner in a triad between horse, human, and hound. The roar of thundering horses galloping in a herd over stunning countryside following a hound pack in pursuit, loudly singing; the wind on my face; the thrill of clearing huge, tall fences; the adrenaline surges fueled by the danger everywhere except atop my personal equine island — the harmony of it all is otherworldly and magical. My senses are battered. The Hindus and Buddhists call it nirvana. Perhaps it's simply a perfect opening day.

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