

# RIDING WITH THE SMITHTOWN HUNT

By Cathleen A. Springer

So, you want to ride on a hunt with the Smithtown Hunt. I'm going to write this story in "hunt-ease" and I'll put the normal talk in brackets. We hunt folk do like to go on and on with the jargon, but it grows on you and it seems – believe it or not – natural after a while.

Guess the whole deal starts when you are thinking about whether you and your horse are the hunting types. The person who hunts has to really like riding in the open spaces, uncharted territory sometimes uneven trails, to underbrush, to occasional paved roads – sometimes all in one ride. If you feel that ring riding and/or an indoor area holds all the adventure you want- this sport isn't going to be for you. If you want to see what's on the other side of the mountain, so to speak, we've got you covered. One young lady recently commented after a day with Smithtown Hunt, "All this time I've been riding in black and white, today was TECHNICOLOR!!!.

What about your horse? Is he/she used to dogs, horns, crowds of horses, irregular footing like puddles, small ditches, muddy trails, rocks? Most horses have handled all this without problems, if yours has, too, so much the better. Does your horse have the ability to stand quietly while a group of other horses gallop off in another direction? If you are cantering along with a group of horses and you decide to stop, can your horse do so without lengthening your arms a few inches??<G> Got a kicker, rearer or biter – best not to put them in a situation where they are likely to get into trouble. If you think you have a solid citizen horse who isn't spooky or a run-away, give it a whirl. There are lots of horses who seem to find the great outdoors a "mind clearing" experience after the intensity of intricate reining, flat work and jumping patterns in the ring. Remember, horses didn't originally inhabit rings – they roamed open fields and prairies, right?

Remember you're going to have to wear proper attire [clothing depends on the day of the week you hunt, but ALWAYS includes safe headgear. You need to contact the Hunt Secretary to let her know that you'd like to come to the hunt. Our information is on the internet. Do yourself a favor with tack, over-bit your horse. You don't have to use it, but

it's too late to change it when you are miles away from the trailer and your spare bridle. If you use a martingale, put it on. If you use boots for your horse for non-ring riding, they're probably fine, but try to avoid polo wraps – they can unwrap at the most inopportune moment and they don't provide any support to speak of.

Be sure to ride with a buddy. If you don't know anyone at the hunt, ask the Hunt Secretary or Field Master who to buddy with - they'll know and they'll keep an eye out for you during the day, too. The hunt has specific groups which make riding comfortable and safe for all levels of riders. There's Third flight where you mostly walk and trot behind the others. Second Flight is a bit livelier you'll ride pretty close to first flight, but won't be galloping "hell bent for election". A controlled canter and occasional jump is the top speed for this gang. First flight is for the truly adventurous for whom speed and a bit of risk-taking is all part of the thrill.

So, you're at the fixture [place where the hunt is to take place that day], you've given your capping fee [modest fee for the day's sport, placed in an envelope with your name and address on it] to the Secretary, your clothes, tack and horse are ready to go - let's ride!!!!

One of the first things you'll hear the hounds barking in the hound van while they wait to come out. You'll see other riders getting tacked up and gathering around the hound van. Remember, these animals are the "stars" of the day. Without them, it's just a dress up trail ride. Anyway, the Huntsman [ rider in a red [AKA pink} coat with a hunt horn. She will tell the kennel man to let hounds out. About 10 or twelve hounds mostly brown and white will come streaming out of the van and will be delighted to get some fresh air and "empty out" They'll sniff around, roll, water the foliage – doggie stuff – while the Huntsman and Whippers-in [folks in red coats with whips that they NEVER use directly on hounds, but will "crack" in the air to remind wanderers that they have a job to do out here. Though it's not apparent to you, there is constant taking of "attendance" to the hounds. It's important that they are all present and accounted for throughout the day, so you'll hear the Whippers-in report to the Huntsman how many are with her and who's missing- if any.

Now, here's an important thing to point out – Smithtown Hunt is a SCENT or drag hunt. That means that hounds follow a scent trail laid out by the "Fox" [a very nice, but sometimes smelly fellow <G>] who rides ahead of the hunt and squirts a liquid that smells

like foxes on the path that hounds are to follow. Hunts in other parts of the country do actually look for foxes using hounds that are trained to do so. Smithtown Hunt does NOT hunt foxes . This group enjoys the hounds' hard work in following the scent – it's neat to watch this drama unfold – and there is no need to rid the countryside of legions of foxes, so we don't do it – PERIOD.

Back to our ride, hounds are out, you're watching them and hoping that your horse doesn't find the spectacle too "busy". Then, the Huntsman blows her horn and the group moves off towards chosen path of the day. You have found your buddy and are safely following his/her horse along with the rest of the field [all riders without a particular title i.e. Whipper-in, Field Master, Huntsman.] The hounds are all trotting along and "chatting" with one another. The kind of doggie verbal exchange you hear now is very different from what will be coming up soon. The hounds are kept walking behind the Huntsman by the Whippers-in until she gives the signal to let them go ahead and into the woods. There are all sorts of verbal cues given to hounds and each Huntsman has his language between him and the pack. OK, hounds have gone ahead into the woods and your sit there wondering "What's next?" Ah ha, well you might ask, the fun's about to begin.

As the hounds leap forward into the woods, listen carefully. You'll hear one hound "speak to the line"[start to call out, it's not like howling or barking. It's more like doggie singing, if you will, and it's incredibly happy as though they are saying, "You guys are not going to believe this- I think I've got some great smells here. Come on over and get a sniff of THIS!!!] Then, another and another hound will "honor" [join in the singing] with the first hound that discovered the scent. Pretty soon, the woods are alive with the sound of hounds singing their hearts out as they run along following the scent. Just in case you made the mistake of thinking you could sit back and relax to listen to the "music" WRONG – you have a front row seat and it's in motion. You are your horse are not going to be part of the sometimes wild ride through countryside. You may well find yourself caught up in the excitement of the sights and sounds around you. Surely, you won't miss the Huntsman's horn and she blows sounds that cheer on the hounds and make the heart-rates of every veteran fox hunter beat faster. You and your horse will follow with the "fields" that your have chosen as the most appropriate for each of your abilities. The speed varies with each field, as mentioned before. The terrain is most often woodland. So, you'll follow pathways in the woods that are used by the normal inhabitants of the area. You may find the occasional log to jump, a small ditch to cross, rare hills to climb

and descent, and a fair number of tree branches to duck under. Seems like lots of stuff going on all at one time – you’re right and it’s pretty amazing stuff. If your buddy should call out over his/her shoulder “Ware hole right” – scoot your horse to the left immediately. The signal you have just received is to beware of a hole in the ground [could be from a fallen tree, a den, who knows] the rider is warning you to avoid this area. Make it a point to keep at least a horse-length between you and the rider in front of you all the time. It’s a safety thing in case that rider had a problem; you may need to stop your horse at any point during the day.

Hounds generally run after the scent path at a pace equivalent to a gallop, though riders in the various fields do not keep up with them. That is the job of the Whippers-in to bring the ones on the wrong path [a split] back to the right path so that they all work as a team. You’ll see that happen once in a while.

Once the hounds have followed the scent to the check [a spot for everyone to stop, and regroup, count hounds, cool horses, catch your breath, grin like crazy ‘cause you’re having so much fun dashing through the country, that sort of thing.] they get to rest and cool out a bit. They are praised for their good work. This is the time to talk to fellow riders instead of when hounds are working. The reasons are that you miss hearing hounds if you are talking and your conversation could distract them from what they are out there to do. Checks last about 10 minutes give or take. Then, it all begins again in another part of the hunt area. You can figure on about 5 or 6 checks in a hunt before the hounds and horses are ready to call it a day.

On the ride back to the trailers, you’ll chat with everyone around you sharing your thoughts on the spine-tingling feeling when hounds are “all on” [running as a pack tightly together] and speaking to the line [you know, singing!!!] You’ll wonder what gave you the courage jump a ditch or log, zip around a corner and find that you are about to enter a lush pasture things you didn’t expect to see – all sorts of things you’ll not encounter in a ring. You’ll be grateful to the folks who kept a watchful eye on you and your horse to make sure you didn’t get into any situation you weren’t ready to handle. You’ll LOVE the sight of that trailer and warm tow vehicle awaiting you and your horse, but not just yet.

Hounds need to be rewarded for the hard work they’ve done to entertain you. They will be gathered at the hound van and you will be there, too. The Huntsman will give them a

bucketful of do bones spread out so everyone can get their share. She will then blow a long, warbling sound on the horn that signals the end of the day for the hounds. Once they have been rewarded and praised, they go back on the hound van and you have the opportunity to thank all the people that made this such a wonderful day for you. Generally, a single group thank you will do for now. Once you get to know these folks by name, they all appreciate a personal thank you.

Now, it's time to go back to the trailers, hug your horse and put him/her up with whatever wraps and coolers you usually use. They are ready for a snooze and some hay and water while you may be lucky enough to go to a tea [nothing the name implies – it's a little party where you get to exchange your impressions of the day with the people who were out there to share it] and to have a light snack.

Well, what's it going to be??? This is really a neat way to enjoy the glories of nature with your horse and some pretty nice- and often gutsy- people . We're going to have fun and we'd sure like you to have some, too. Smithtown Hunt's telephone number is (631) 909-2940. There's an announcement about when and where the next event will be – wouldn't you like to be there, too?????