

**The following is an edited extract from ‘*Hunting Hints & Breeding Thoughts*’
by Roddy Bailey published in 2017.**

HUNTSMAN’S HINTS

The following are just hints for a huntsman based on my own experiences. These are my views not necessarily those of the IMFHA and they may not be shared by all. There is no blue print for handling a pack of hounds but perhaps my greatest mentor was Kilkenny born Tom Cody who hunted the Bramham Moor Hounds for more years than I care to count. It is important to remember hunting in Ireland is similar but not the same as Britain which is where I learnt my trade. Some aspects I mention may not apply to somebody hunting hounds where access for the huntsman is not as ‘manicured’ as it is in many (but not all) English countries. For example, in Ireland coverts rarely have ‘rides’ so the hunt staff cannot get about readily. Often, to get out of covert onto a fox’s line is a major undertaking perhaps involving the negotiation of several thick banks which takes time. Hardly ever is the Irish huntsman faced with the ease of two hunt jumps and a wicket gate and he is away.

A terrierman is essential. Properly conducted terrier work is vital to competent foxhunting. As regards the huntsman or kennel huntsman the saying that ‘if you want to breed a pack of hounds first breed your huntsman’ is true of both breeding and hound handling. I will leave the complexities of terrier work, earth stopping and country organisation to others. You can’t go foxhunting without foxes so love and respect the fox as a worthy and honoured quarry and not as a sorry pest. The welfare aspects of kennels are well covered by the Hunting Association of Ireland’s *Guidelines for Hunt Kennels in Ireland* published in 2007. Martin Letts’s *Notes From a Hound Man* is invaluable to the huntsman be he/she honorary or professional, and the ‘honorary’ should aspire to be as professional as his or her skills allow. I have incorporated some of Martin’s advice in this article. No huntsman should take to the field without consuming the short but essential *Goodall’s Practice* - advice such as that booklet contains doesn’t come better. Since the performance of a pack of hounds is firstly handling and secondly breeding I have tried to remember some pointers that helped me provide some fun for those who love hunting.

Handling. I learnt hounds should be on a loose rein as much as possible; any fool can hold a pack behind but it takes an artist to have them in front on a 'thread'. This is achieved by skill at hound exercise and in the kennel using its layout to advantage. One famous huntsman believed hounds should be treated like ladies i.e. kennel gates opened for them and then hounds invited through. Young hounds coming in from walk must receive attention from that moment onwards. This is part of their formative period. They must not be neglected until hunting has finished. Hounds are intelligent individuals and should be treated as such. They should spend the maximum amount of time outside kennels and be exercised at least twice daily and it should be fun for them. The timing of exercise and walking out should be the same each day - hounds thrive on routine. If the huntsman wants a pack steady to riot that state begins in the kennel and outside at summer exercise with proper handling. Foxhounds should be steady to riot, sheep and dogs and properly managed foxhounds don't fight. If they do fight in kennels there is a management problem that must be addressed - and not by passing the issue onto somebody else by drafting. Let hounds learn an open gate in kennel or field is not an invitation to rush through.

When on the road teach them to be handy in front using the 'T' junction test. This means when moving down a road approaching a 'T' junction with hounds well in front a settled pack should stop, turn to look at their huntsman and wait for his quiet almost silent indication as to which way to go. A badly handled pack continues rushing left or right at the junction not waiting for the Huntsman's inclination. Try slipping into an adjacent field without notice or doing 'about turn' without warning; inevitably there is an element of 'kidology' involved. This teaches hounds to be attentive when on a loose rein some distance in front of their huntsman. Obviously the area needs to be appropriate for such exercises and road safety is important. That a pack reflects the character of the person hunting them is beyond doubt. The huntsman's mood goes down his whip so stay calm and relaxed - not always easy. The huntsman's feelings easily transfer to the hounds.

If they are jogging on too fast - slow down. Don't chase them.

It is often appropriate for the whipper-in to be in front of the huntsman ('at their heads') especially when on the road. Since hounds hunt in front of their

huntsman it is handy if they spend as much time as possible in that position. It also allows the Huntsman to confer with the Field Master behind without the hounds being unsettled. The hunt staff should rehearse a slick method of changing who 'takes their heads' i.e. whether it is the huntsman in front or the whipper - in.

Keep your whipper - in handy if near hazards such as motorways, railways & major roads. You may have to stop hounds hard. In any event if hounds have to be stopped when they have done no wrong take the pack some distance away before you dismount and apologise to them.

Hunting Whips. The hunting whip is a useful tool in the collective handling of a pack of hounds. It consists of:

Lash. The short cord at the end of the thong.

Keeper. The loop to which the thong is attached. It should not be stitched. The open loop allows it to be used as a 'snare' to catch an injured hound.

Thong. Hopefully a 'bull' thong whose thickness decreases from 'keeper' to 'lash'. Other types thicken in the middle. The thong should be two and a half times the length of the shank (see below). This achieves balance allowing it to be cracked more easily. Any longer and horses may tread on it.

Shank. The 'stick' part of the whip which should not be too long.

The 'Heel'. The end of the shank which facilitates gate opening. Many have a small nail like protrusion which allows grip on slippery winter surfaces such as wooden rails and farm gates.

Whip cracking is a bit like hollering; once learnt people persist in doing it. The 'crack' means desist to the erring hound; it does not mean 'get on' to the huntsman. If a whip is cracked out hunting more than half a dozen times a season there is something amiss. Best learnt sat on a gate rather than on a horse the crack is achieved by a nonchalant wrist movement. It should be effortless so as not to alarm the horse. When the thong is let down it should fall close to the horse's flank rather than held out as a fishing rod. Unless the huntsman is on foot the whip should not be carried 'curled'. It should be held with the thong dropping on the same side of the horse as the whip's 'heel'. The

way a hunting whip (and a horn) is carried by a practitioner is sometimes seen as an indication of the user's early training - so be careful how you are photographed.

Equally useful 'tools' are a pocket knife, string and a small amount of washing soda carried by the hunt staff. The soda makes a hound vomit in case poison or other chemical has been inadvertently eaten.

Fitness. You cannot hunt fit foxes with unfit foxhounds. A pack should be fit for the second day's autumn hunting (not the first outing otherwise you may risk a 'flashy' beginning when early success might be helpful). Hound exercise should start on bicycles in early May and increase in distance without it becoming a drudge to hounds and huntsman. It must be instructive and it must be varied. The 'gate and T junction trick' (see above) plus holding them near and in stock is all part of the process. Once fit and good at their job it is worth remembering a fit, 'high mettle' pack needs professionally trained handling.

Pack Size. Whilst autumn hunting may demand more hounds than regular hunting too many hounds are detrimental to sport. During autumn hunting the wise huntsman takes out only a few young hounds. They will learn mischief quicker than anything else and if say 10 couple of 'puppies' are taken they have the weight to continue any error. If however only about 4 couple are taken out the erring youngsters quickly give up bad behaviour and return to the expert majority. It is a question of 'weight' as the late, great Johnny Richardson (Blencathra) argued. The belief that young hounds learn little by staying at home is misleading; once mischief is acquired it is difficult to cure. Better to reduce the chances of permanent harm by taking out fewer 'puppies' more often. Remember when planning autumn hunting to first locate your young foxes then go hunting. Trailing around finding one old fox demoralises young hounds and contributes nothing to the twin aims of such hunting; educating the young hounds and educating the young foxes. A third aim might be added - confirming the education of second season hounds. If foxes are scarce yet you have to visit the area just take old hounds but beware of creating differing fitness levels i.e. young/old hounds.

In regular hunting a large pack takes longer to cross a hazard than a small one and in these days of heavy traffic this has to be a consideration. The strengths

and weaknesses of a pack are seen in greater relief within a small pack than a large one. That said the 'breeding' kennels i.e. those on whom other kennels rely, need to keep a larger number of hounds than a kennel with no such commitment to other hunts or a national responsibility to the development of the foxhound. Every hound in the kennel must hunt. A foxhound should do two days a week minimum; perhaps three in many cases. Without such hunting frequency the hounds are unlikely to be an effective team. Work cures most problems. The luxury of hunting separate doghound and bitch packs is confined to four day a week kennels although a three day kennel can get away with a bitch pack plus a mixed pack, the former allowing 'hot bitches' to be hunted. Avoid the temptation to hunt bitches one day and a doghound pack the other in a two day establishment since neither pack will be fully fit.

Noise. I began as a 'noisy' huntsman. I learnt quickly hounds respond better to a quieter huntsman who uses his horn and voice sparingly but consistently. A huntsman must be allowed to blow that which he/she finds easiest. Providing the practitioner observes the three 'modes' to reflect activities of the chase unreasonable pressure for conformity should be avoided. These 'modes' might be summarised as 'something is happening', 'nothing is happening' and 'I want something'. That said any hunting day is enhanced by the followers witnessing an artist on a horn. A huntsman's voice should vary its tone to the circumstances of the chase and should be used economically. Like children hounds quickly ignore a nagging, 'one toned' handler. When in larger woodlands a huntsman may have to make greater use of horn and voice than when in smaller coverts. Although it omits the 'modern', sharp double perhaps the most instructive recording of horn and voice is David Brock's *'Hunting by Ear'* using the skills of the great Pytchley Huntsman Stanley Barker.

Use of the Horn at a Meet. Some huntsmen use a horn at a meet before they move off. This may be of use on public occasions where profile matters but generally it is bad practice. Not long ago most huntsmen, honorary or professional, were criticised for musical utterances at the meet for two reasons; it disturbed the quarry in nearby coverts especially during the latter half of the season and encouraged hounds to wander so risking them being kicked by fresh horses at a meet. If hounds are in the habit of not receiving warning of the huntsman's intention to depart they concentrate on him/her so

as not to be left behind. By contrast a horn 'warning' removes that imperative thus allowing the hounds to wander aimlessly about knowing they will receive a horn signal if their attention is needed.

Going to a View. Excessive hollering is a curse (whistles can be a useful option - mobiles/radios can be used - and abused) but few huntsmen have not prayed for a timely view. Often the best hunts are obtained by allowing the pack to hunt their fox away themselves rather than trying to take them to a holloa. If the huntsman elects to go to a view he must consider whether his tactic will be successful otherwise hounds quickly lose confidence in an unsuccessful huntsman. This is invariably a matter of timing and also needs coverts to be well 'rided' - not usually the case in Ireland. It is pointless attempting to go to a view unless the huntsman can take at least a quorum of his pack (say 2/3rds) with him/her. Rather than heading off with few hounds leaving the others elsewhere it is better the huntsman pause, wait for a serious check or other break and then attempt to lift his charges by paying hounds the compliment of going to fetch them. Hounds then arrive as a team and if it is done quietly, they arrive with their heads down ready to hunt although it may take them several fields to settle (i.e. tune into their fox) remembering every fox has a different smell and that smell varies depending on the ground - inside covert, outside covert and so on. At this stage speed and noise can be detrimental. Hounds do not like noise and a huntsman galloping about screaming and blowing his horn doesn't impress anybody. There is a world of difference between a quick huntsman and a huntsman in a bad hurry. Blaming a whipper in for not getting hounds onto a huntsman is often unfair. The real issue is usually the huntsman's failure to recognise timing.

Doubling the Horn. This is much over used. Doubling the horn means 'Hey lads! Come here quick I have a fox underneath me!' It is important hounds get the reward of the fox's smell when they arrive at the source of the horn. The listener should hear the staccato notes of the horn doubling followed shortly by the sound of hounds opening on the line. Hence the horn should not be used in this manner unless the huntsman is within striking distance of the line he wants to hit off. Doubling a horn and then cantering to a line some distance away will reduce the confidence hounds have in their huntsman and eventually result in them ignoring his signals.

Hollering for Hounds. Unless there is an emergency (railway or motorway hazard) huntsmen should not use a holloa (or holler) as a method of bringing hounds to them. Such practices get hounds 'holloa minded' resulting in a lack of steadiness. It also means anybody who can holloa is able to take hounds from the huntsman irrespective of the huntsman's wishes. In principle a pack of hounds should not go to a holloa unless given leave to do so but that is easier said than done. Better the huntsman develop his own unique voice signal which should result in hounds being responsive to him alone.

Cheering. The technique of 'cheering away' (usually done by a whipper - in but sometimes the huntsman) is an example of an intoned voice used in an unmistakable way. Its use announces the departure of hounds hunting away from covert thus alerting the followers to the start of a hunt. This skill can also bring hounds as efficiently as 'blowing away' on a horn. It is of particular value in steep or trappy countries when the whipper - in and pack find themselves on distant or inaccessible ground. This can result in the huntsman being unable to influence events at such a crucial moment. The 'cheer' consists of 4 or 5 intoned 'forrard away' phrases amply demonstrated by Stanley Barker in '*Hunting by Ear*' - presumably with the proverbial finger in his ear whilst recording it.

Casting. This vital aspect of the huntsman's craft, known to earlier generations as the 'science of ventry', is often overlooked. The huntsman should try and strike a balance between the vital sense of urgency and the necessity of leaving hounds alone. Books have been devoted to this subject perhaps the best two being David Brock's *To Hunt the Fox* and his post WW2 *Introduction to Foxhunting* (both have useful diagrams). Hounds soon lose confidence after repeated ineffective casting by their handler so technique is important. Some considerations:

1. The huntsman must make allowance for wind strength and direction plus assess the scenting conditions which will dictate the pace of any cast. Ironically, on a poor scent the cast should be slow; on a good scent the huntsman can risk some speed (brisk trot?).
2. Few foxes run straight therefore is the hunted fox a right or left handed one?

3. Why have the hounds checked? Where and what is the cause? Smelly sheep, cattle foil, equally smelly horses or people? Tractor fumes, roads, interference i.e. sheep dogs. The list is almost endless but if the huntsman knows why hounds have lost the line he/she is well on the way to knowing how to recover it.
4. From which direction did they come to the check? If in serious doubt let hounds go heel for a short distance thus indicating the forward line but don't do that too often. When at a road remember most foxes tend to leave at the same angle at which they approached it.
5. If a fox enters a field he must have left it unless he takes refuge within its boundaries.
6. What ground has been covered by the hounds in their own cast? They must be allowed to cast themselves even if this takes a bit of time. The huntsman should only interfere as a last option. Give them time, trust and room.
7. What angle should the huntsman use when casting hounds? Unless it is an extraordinarily good scenting day allowing a 'galloping cast' hounds should be cast quietly with their noses down at such an angle to reduce the risk of running heel. The position of the whipper - in here is crucial. Use should be made of the position of the Huntsman's horse. A pack of hounds will often take their direction from the outline of the huntsman's horse e.g. when casting or putting into covert. Turn your horse's head to the required direction and the hounds will turn too. Many a hill huntsman can cast like this with a pack some distance away on another slope; no whipper - in needed.
8. Try to nudge and so let the hounds think it was their own effort that was successful.
9. Whilst casting try to keep hounds in front of you rather than drag them from behind.
10. Perseverance can be instilled in a pack of hounds if the huntsman reflects that quality.

11. If at a loss as to the route taken by the quarry try the circular cast that makes good the ground all-round the point of the check. The principle is to cast first in the direction you think the fox has not gone and then circle methodically until hounds recover the lost line. It is often successful but time consuming. If you have an inkling as to which way the fox has gone don't lose time circling; if you have no idea get circling.

12. **Beware of false marking.** It is invariably the huntsman's fault and once a pack has this habit it is difficult to eradicate. Get somebody to guard nearby holes whilst hounds are cast round and forward. If in a hole it is unlikely your fox is going anywhere soon but if he has 'bobbed' and gone on (usually in the autumn and spring) time is lost if the line is not recovered beyond the holes because the faulty huntsman is busy marking 'rabbits'. Do not allow anybody to go to holes without your consent. Uninvited gatherings at holes often leads to false marking.

13. A good pack of hounds shouldn't need casting assistance regularly.

14. Don't hassle the hounds at a check. The more the hound is allowed to develop his instincts the better he/she will be and the more the huntsman will learn. Be quiet and calm.

Leading hounds. Those hounds leading a hunt need to be watched especially when entering covert since their progress may indicate a change of foxes. If the same few hounds leading into a covert are the same as those coming out a change of pilot is perhaps unlikely. If however the leading hounds are seen to have changed from entry to exit, especially if accompanied by a serious check, then the huntsman may conclude hounds have changed to another fox. In many situations you might have difficulty reverting hounds to their original quarry. If they are settled and running their new fox most huntsmen would not consider recovering the original pilot since you risk collapsing both hunts.

If you have held on to your quarry throughout a hunt be careful not to get too excited. Over excited huntsmen lose foxes at the closing stages of a hunt. Keep relatively quiet and leave it to the hounds. If you have to intervene make sure it is decisive.

Hounds Persistently in Front. Too much attention is given to hounds that hunt in front. The real workers (and the finders maybe only 3 or 4 couple in any pack; the good markers similarly numbered) are often in the main body. Any pack is improved by removing the flashy first six and the dwelling last six hunting hounds.

Countries vary enormously so huntsmen must adapt to suit their local conditions. A well-handled, competent pack of hounds produces sport for the enjoyment of all. Hunting should be fun. Hopefully these few hints may help some practitioners produce a bit of fun wherever they are.

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