



Chasing History

Point-to-Point Racing with the Fairfax Hunt

Story and Photos
by
E. J. Felker

*The day
wouldn't be
complete
without
tailgating
along the
rail.*

Dr. William Allison watched the post parade from high atop the steward stand before the start of the first race of Fairfax Hunt's 34th Annual Point-to-Point Races. A full field of 15 horses and riders filed by, each with escorts, in a wide, slow circle below. Allison smiled. "Beautiful," he said. "The way it should be."

And Allison knows a thing or two about the way it should be. He is a longtime Master of Foxhounds for the Warrenton Hunt and chairman of the prestigious Virginia Gold Cup, one of the oldest and most popular sporting events in the greater Washington metropolitan area.

The track at Morven Park just west of Leesburg, Virginia, had seen its fair share of rain in the days before the race. But it is always heavily groomed and lightly used (only two major races are held there annually) and on this day the sun shone brightly. Conditions are typically very good at Morven, making this a popular prep-race for jockeys and horse owners gearing up for the Gold Cup held two weeks later.

The Fairfax Hunt has held its annual races here since 2006. "We are extraordinarily fortunate to hold our races at Morven Park," says Steffanie Burgevin,



Circling before the start

the secretary of the board of the hunt. It's not just an ideal location for this event, with a great track and excellent sight lines for spectators; Morven Park and the Fairfax Hunt share some intertwining history as well.

Westmoreland Davis, governor of Virginia from 1918 to 1922, bought Morven Park in 1903 and lived there until his death in 1942. An avid equestrian and fox hunter, Davis transformed the property into an agricultural showplace while in residence. In 1907, he co-founded the Masters of the Foxhounds Association, to this day the governing organization for all sanctioned hunt clubs.

The Fairfax Hunt, founded in 1928 by A. Smith Bowman, was recognized by Davis' association in 1933. For the next four decades, members enjoyed excellent hunting across Fairfax County. But the hunt has always been more than just a sporting club. Dignitaries, diplomats and military leaders were drawn from Washington, D.C., not just to the excellent hunting territory, but to the social nature of the club.

Ironically, the proximity to the nation's capital that gave rise to the early success of the Fairfax Hunt would ultimately be responsible for the development explosion in the '60s and '70s that swallowed up its spectacular hunting terrain. A lesser club, with lesser leadership, would have folded under the wave of progress. But the Fairfax Hunt's leadership, including still-serving Master Randolph Rouse, sought the cooperation of the neighboring hunts (Loudoun, Middleburg and Piedmont) and petitioned for the blessing of the Masters of the Foxhounds Association to move the hunt to neighboring Loudoun County. So in the early 1970s, the hunt moved foxhunting to Ashburn, and their races to Belmont, both in Loudoun County.

But while there is excellent foxhunting in Loudoun County, and the entire region has the largest number of hunts within driving distance of perhaps anywhere in the world, growing a hunt club in Northern Virginia these days is not without its challenges. The point-to-





Dr. William Allison (left) chats with Senior Master of Foxhounds Randolph Rouse.

The track at Morven Park was in ideal condition.





The exciting hurdle races are a fan favorite.

Stick-horse races for the kids are an annual tradition.



point races, an important revenue generator for the hunts, have seen decreasing attendance in recent years. Some hunts have even had to give up their race meets.

Some observers, such as Dr. Allison, point to the economy. He has seen declining numbers at even the renowned Gold Cup in the past two years. But corporate tent sales have rebounded this year, and he is optimistic that the event will bounce back stronger than ever.

However, the smaller, unsanctioned point-to-points held by the local hunts, are not as well equipped to absorb such a dip. And Steffanie Burgevin has some concerns beyond the economy. The hunt membership has gotten smaller, and there are fewer social members from D.C. Furthermore, she explains, more kids are raised in suburbia and don't grow up riding and living with horses. "It's a very challenging environment," she said. "[Young people] don't really gravitate to the horse world because it isn't in their face." Kids do travel to the country from the suburbs

to take riding lessons, but that is a very different kind of commitment.

That's not to say there isn't a wave of young riders getting into fox hunting. "We are grateful that we have so many young, enthusiastic members," Burgevin said. But she admits that more of the fox hunting members are aging and that the next crop is not typically lifelong horse people. When Burgevin was growing up, "everyone aspired to be a jockey," she said. "It's a changing world."

One of the riders Dr. Allison watches in the first race post parade is Diana Gillam, aboard her father's horse, Happy Digger. Gillam's father is from England, and a cursory glance at the jockeys' names in the program reveals a strong English and Irish influence throughout the field. The reason, Gillam explains, mirrors Burgevin's discussion of how things have changed here in the U.S. over the years. In England and Ireland, steeplechase racing is a "front-page sport," she says. "Young kids there still aspire to be jockeys."

Gillam grew up on fox hunting and pony races, which Dr. Allison calls a sort of "farm system" for the hunt clubs' point-to-point races. Those races are in turn a farm system for the sanctioned steeplechase meets. And the health – and futures – of all three are integral to each other.

Happy Digger started off strong, but after a mile and a quarter, a horse named Bonded (an Irish import) crossed the wire first, kicking off a day of great racing. But it's not all about the racing, of course. There are those wonderful classic hats, elaborate, delicious tailgate displays and stick-horse races for the kids. Fans enjoyed a special visit from the hounds of the Fairfax Hunt, paraded up and down the home stretch behind Huntsman Kevin Palmer and his daughter, Tabitha. The 21 hounds, clearly a crowd favorite, made frequent stops for photos, visits with spectators and a well-earned drink and splash in the water troughs.

If anyone was worried on this day

about the future of fox hunting or steeplechase racing, they did not show it. There was only one threat looming and it eventually got everyone's attention: an ominous storm closing in from the west. But the sixth and final race of the day went off, perhaps rushed a few minutes ahead of the scheduled post time, as lightning flickered against a charcoal sky. Tailgates were packed up quickly while spectators divided their attention between the horses and the darkening sky.



Love Colony, under rider Paddy Young, crossed the finish line as the rains came. The wind picked up until it was more than folding tables or umbrellas could withstand. But horses and hounds, jockeys and fans, all made it to cover before the storm unleashed its brief but powerful fury.

No doubt the storm ruined a few Easter hats, but it passed quickly – a blip on the radar – and the skies brightened as they always do. And as the Fairfax Hunt looks forward to the future, members can

Post parade before the first race



**The Fairfax Hunt
Point-to-Point Races**

Sunday, April 22, 2012
Morven Park, Leesburg, VA
www.thefairfaxhunt.com

For more information about the races,
please call (540) 687-0611

surely find comfort in looking back. If they can endure and thrive through the challenges they've already faced, then the odds are good that the Fairfax Hunt, under their devoted leadership, will see bright skies ahead.

Next year, the Fairfax Hunt Point-to-Point Races take place at Morven Park on Sunday, April 22, 2012. For tickets, or for more information on the races or the Fairfax Hunt, visit www.fairfax-huntraces.org.

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MOTORCYCLE TOURS

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some of them true, were told. Of course, in almost all the tales, the biggest fish got away. As the evening wore on, some of the lost fish seemed suitable for the *River Monsters* outdoors program.

Besides great scenery, fishing, and wines, there are a number of bed and breakfasts, golf courses, restaurants, and hotels in the immediate area. While we caught our icicle trout in cold temperatures, the steel-head action heats up during the warmer spring and fall months.

Paul Liikala has written for over three dozen magazines and newspapers. He was the past Ohio editor for *Outdoor Life* magazine, and recent articles have appeared in *Crappie World*, *Outdoor News*, *The Suburbanite*, and *Fur-Fish-Game*. He co-hosted the award-winning *Tackle Box* radio show and does public speaking.