

THE FIELD

February 2022

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Coyote country

Hallmarks of a day with Canada's Toronto & North York Hunt include a fast-paced quarry and maple liqueur in the stirrup cup

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Early meets, fast hunts on coyote and a lavish breakfast are all part of an average day with Canada's second oldest pack, the Toronto & North York Hunt, founded in 1843. The hounds were originally kennelled in the city but, like many other packs, they have been forced to relocate several times to escape the ever-growing urbanisation of Toronto. The tranquil property the hunt club now calls home is situated just outside the town of Creemore, best known for its brewery – although I am told this was not the reason for their relocation. Hunting friendly countryside and obliging land-owners led the Toronto to its new home, where sole Master Andy Bite ensures that every visitor is treated as a special guest.

The kennels consist of a well-proportioned huntsman's house, an eight-stable barn with accommodation for visitors, a rather extravagant club house and a cross-country course. Currently in residence at the kennels is the first and only lady

“ The bush is a large area of cedar woodland amidst deep ravines ”

huntsman of a pack hunting live quarry in Canada, Rosslyn Balding. She is the widow of the late Owen Balding, who hunted the North Tyne for 14 seasons before moving to the Coniston Foxhounds as huntsman. Balding came to Canada eight seasons ago, first whipping-in to the Toronto before taking over as huntsman five seasons ago, where she cuts a dash over the cedar rail fencing. Many of the membership don't follow her, preferring to stick to coops, the common timber-constructed hunt jumps (emulating chicken coops) found in hunt country throughout North America.

This Canadian pack's hunting country is divided into two distinct areas: the prehistoric Niagara escarpment (covered in bush) and the more populated prairie below. The bush, as it is known, is a large area of cedar woodland, set amongst deep ravines running off the escarpment. The area is entirely unmanaged and largely inaccessible to riders. This variety of →

Honorary whipper-in Andy Vienneau and huntsman Rosslyn Balding lead the Toronto & North York hounds during a meet last September



terrain means hounds must be versatile, with some of the country lying on wet clay, compared to the lower areas of the country where bone-dry sand is found. The latter makes for tough scenting conditions for hounds, but easy grooming of the hunters.

The straight roads that cross this country were originally laid out by the military and divide the land into equal blocks of 1,000 acres called concessions. Each concession consists of 10 hundred-acre plots, which are all separately owned and, until recently, were unable to be subdivided. To provide a day's sport a multitude of land owners have to be contacted, but hunting is generally supported in the area, which makes the logistics less complicated.

KEEPING TRACK

Unlike an English pack, the hounds of the Toronto & North York wear GPS tracking collars, due to the nature of the country and coyote hunting. Coyote hunts often start with one or two circles of the local area before enough pressure is applied on the quarry to force it to run fast and straight for many miles at a much greater pace than the traditional fox.

'Truck whips' have GPS screens in their vehicles, so they can relay to the huntsman



Left: honorary whipper-in Carl Feairs

Top: the Toronto & North York hounds – a mix of Modern English, Fell and Penn-Marydel – are fitted with GPS tracking devices

Above: the writer enjoys a stirrup cup aside Jean Humphrey's horse, Pearl; Andy Bite to the right
Facing page: the kennels at Creemore can now withstand the severe -20°C winter temperatures

if hounds are hunting north, east, south or west; military directions to match the military road layout.

As with all countries, the Toronto is not without challenges, a sticky one being the 'maple lines'. These wires hang precariously at head or fetlock height, draped from tree to tree throughout the woodland, used for draining maple trees for syrup by the local Mennonite community.

Trip wires aside, there are other native species that can cause hounds difficulty. Groundhogs, racoons, skunks and white-tailed deer share the country but the worst encounter is with porcupines; a day's hunting can be brought to a swift end if their quills become embedded in a hound's face, the porcupine remaining unscathed.

In the north of the country, bear, cougars, moose and wolf can be found. Balding



recalls a day earlier in the season, where hounds may have hunted a bear. “No quarry had been seen during the hunt but hounds spoke in a slow, funny tone, unlike anything I had heard before,” she said. “The older hounds, who generally lead a hunt, returned to me on the road looking bewildered.” It was definitely not a coyote...

Hound breeding is crucial when the country is tough. When Balding took over, the pack was mainly Modern English foxhound with some Fell, which gives them more independence and drive. “I quickly found that the pure Fell would push ahead of the rest of the pack leaving the Modern English hounds behind in the Toronto’s challenging and wild country,” she said. Balding has set about a new breeding programme over the past five years. “I’ve continued to cross the Modern English hounds with Fell blood but also looked to the Penn-Marydel hound for different qualities.”

The Penn-Marydel is similar to a French Poitevin, a hound that provides deep scenting abilities and voice. “This helps to maintain trickier hunts but can show a tendency to dwell on a line if allowed,” says Balding, who has crossed it with the Fell/Modern crosses to create what she believes to be the perfect hound for the country.

Whilst Balding continues to improve the pack’s hunting ability, catching far more coyote than in previous seasons, she has not done this to the detriment of the hounds conformation and continues to be a leading light in the Canadian hound show rings, winning an unprecedented 14 classes at the last outing.

The Canadian hunting season is split in two. First, early August through to mid

Until recently hunt staff, hounds and horses would travel south for the winter

November, when the snow begins to fall and stops play. During winter the huntsman’s job involves a lot of blowing snow with a tractor, to ensure hounds can still be exercised; these snow tunnels work well for keeping the more mischievous hounds up together. Until recently, the hunt staff, hounds and horses would all travel south for the winter to Aiken, South Carolina, in

the United States, to escape the weather. After 14 hours they would break the journey in Virginia and hunt for several weeks by invitation of local packs. They would then continue a further 14 hours to Aiken, where one of their Masters had a property with a house, barn and kennels. Here they would enjoy the sun and return home in April once the snow cleared to start the spring season.

They no longer have the luxury of travelling south (due to the Master’s retirement). As the Toronto kennels were not designed to withstand the -20°C severity of Toronto winters, the lodges have recently been refurbished and are now heated by a propane gas system that allows the kennels to function properly throughout the winter. Balding was particularly impressed by the difference to the whelping lodges. “You can specifically temperature control each lodge’s underfloor heating, dispensing with the need for a heat lamp. It also means pups don’t need to snuggle together to stay warm,” she said. With the upgrade to the kennels only a blizzard allows for a duvet day. One might expect the hunt horses to be kept inside in deep beds, rugged up to their eyeballs. Instead, they are turned out into the field unclipped and →



grow incredibly thick coats, thriving in this extraordinary environment.

Spring appears almost instantly in April, when the second part of the season begins, lasting about six weeks until summer heat and humidity kicks in. This is often a good time for English visitors, when hounds and hunters at home are roughed off. With ground damp from the snow, and autumn leaves no longer an issue, scent is at its best. The spring season can be frustrating as it is so short, "But it often gives opportunity to re-enter puppies who might not have quite been ready to enter in the fall," says Balding.

The hunter of choice to follow these tenacious Canadian hounds is a Percheron-cross-thoroughbred. Parker (owned by member Jean Humphrey), Balding's current mount, is a beautiful example, especially considering the tendency for the cross to often be a little 'cut and shut', with unbalanced proportions. Looks aside, the wise, steady mentality of the Percheron combined with the athleticism and stamina of the thoroughbred appeals and is not dissimilar to the qualities of an Irish Sport



Horse. Another popular choice is an off-the-track thoroughbred, which come into their own on a long, fast run. When I visited in September I was kindly lent a beautiful ex-racehorse owned by long-standing

member Leora Conway, bred by Mike Byrne, who was the chairman of the Canadian Jockey Club and husband to Laurel Byrne, who recently stepped down from the Mastership after many years.

The other common type seen in the Canadian country is a far cry from anything glimpsed on English turf: the Quarter Horse. Whipper-in Teresa Robinson comes from a rodeo and barrel-racing background, and was mounted on a dun Western horse. This versatile horse also competes in barrel racing and team penning – think sheep-dog trialling for cowboys, only with cattle. Robinson described her mount as a natural for controlling hounds, as the Quarter Horse has a herding instinct bred into it over generations.

When I visited in September we met at 9am and finished early afternoon due to the heat, retiring to enjoy a legendary 'breakfast'. The Toronto takes great pride in offering a lavish spread for members and guests. Local delicacy Sortiledge, a maple syrup liqueur, is offered in silver fox-head stirrup cups. This is followed by a Caesar cocktail, a tomato and clam juice combination far more appealing than it sounds. Pair your drink of choice (perhaps a cold beer suits you better) and indulge in the array of home-made meals adorning white

“ We finished early, retiring to enjoy a legendary ‘breakfast’ ”



Facing page: Balding is the only woman employed as a huntsman of a live pack in Canada (top); Nancy Beacon, who hosted the meet, is in her eighties but still rides fiercely to hounds (inset)

This page: Parker, a Percheron x thoroughbred, Balding's main hunt horse (owned by Jean Humphrey), in front of the stables (top); Brutus '17 (right), a Fell x Penn-Marydel, and his son, Chaser '20 (left), half Modern English, quarter Fell, quarter Penn-Marydel

tablecloths, placed amongst bronze sculptures and fresh flowers, with trays of delicacies such as the Nanaimo bar (coconut and caramel shortbread) and you are immediately rejuvenated. These are just some of the treats I enjoyed at Nancy Beacon's meet, set in her picturesque garden overlooking a sea of red maple. Beacon, who is in her eighties and still rides to hounds fiercely, as well as competing in endurance racing, is just one of the many great characters to be found at the hunt.

In charge of the stirrup cup is Polly Winsor, professor emeritus and historian of biology at the University of Toronto. Winsor is another intriguing hunt stalwart who offers insightful lessons in the Toronto's history. She now truck whips after retiring from field mastering; so, if you cannot follow mounted you can join her in her vehicle, be thoroughly entertained and still be on top of the action. The members are just as worthy a visit as their hounds, their country and the sustained hunts on coyote, all of which are well worth the journey from overseas. Aside from the chase, I will miss the company and the kennels, peaceful evenings while crickets hum and horses graze quietly against the dramatic sunsets, before the light fades and the haunting sound of the coyote howls fill the air. ■