

## Take Me Out of the Crowd

It isn't necessarily a matter of bravery. Sometimes it's an allocation of available resources time-wise. Or the practicalities of urban/suburban riding. But the concept of getting out of the arena is one that's foreign to many dressage riders.

I remember a story from back, in the '70s recounted to me by a prominent trainer of the day (who shall remain nameless) who is now an S judge. At the time I knew him to be the sort of rider who defined "trail ride" as what he did on the shortest line between his barn and the indoor arena. It came to pass that he was traveling in Europe on a horse-hunting expedition, and he had arranged to try some FEI horses at Ernst Bachinger's stable in Vienna. Bachinger was a prominent rider at the Spanish Riding School, and like many trainers at the SRS, had a regular lesson/training business which he conducted "after school" hours. As my friend tells the story, he showed up at to see the horses, and Bachinger greeted him saying, "Never mind that. We'll do dressage tomorrow. Let's go for a trail ride today."

What followed was a wild ride on a pair horses through the Vienna Woods, Bachinger in the lead, with my friend dodging clods of mud kicked up by the horse ahead he was trying to keep up with. The punch line, as you may have guessed, is that the next morning when he showed up to try the two FEI dressage horses he'd been promised a look at, they were the very same two that they'd taken on the mad gallop the day before!

Doing something—anything—besides plowing around in the sand can be a welcome relief for your horse. I'm not recommending you mimic Herr Bachinger's approach in toto, but a degree of cross-training or non-training clearly has psychological benefits for your horse. The same can be said for your state of mind as a rider for at least three reasons: 1) it cleans out your cobwebs, 2) it reminds you of what natural athletic qualities we're playing with when we go about restructuring a horse's posture and balance, and 3) it makes us de-intellectualize parts of our riding and make it more instinctual and reflexive.

All this is leading up to some fox hunting tales which illustrate, at the very least, what dressage divas may be missing. I am convinced that most foxhunters participate in their sport for two reasons: the parties afterwards and the stories they can tell each other and their usually-aghast non-hunting friends.

By way of biographical explanation, I didn't start riding at all until I was halfway through my 18<sup>th</sup> year of life, and I had ridden a total of nine weeks before I went hunting for the first time, clinging desperately to the yoke of my horse's breastplate and hoping fervently to make it to my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. I should add for those of you repulsed by the notion of "blood sports" that in all the years I hunted—in Pennsylvania, New England, Maryland, and Virginia—I never once witnessed a fox being hurt or even particularly inconvenienced. Back in western Pennsylvania in the '60s, there was one red that members dubbed the "Bakerstown Fox." If nothing turned up in the other coverts, he could always be roused up for a good afternoon's run up towards 20-mile-distant Bakerstown and—most gratifyingly—back to the starting point which obviated the need for a long, chilly hack home. To be polite, the huntsman tried not to prevail upon that fox too often for his services.

When I hunted in New England, a married couple took turns hunting the hounds. The distaff member of the couple was a rather lithesome blonde (yes, you could say she was attractively built) who eschewed the conservative custom of the time and hunted the hounds wearing a red coat and black boots with brown tops which she felt she was as entitled to as any male huntsman. Most memorably, one fall day she was hunting the hounds in the picturesque old Quansett Hunt country in the tidewater area east of Newport, Rhode Island. The land was a mix of small cornfields surrounding by hundred-year-old stone walls, green pastures that extended right to the beach, thickly wooded copses, and brackish salt marshes through which small rivers wound. That day the hounds committed a major sin and “went off” on a deer which proceeded to swim across the Westport River with them in hot pursuit. Our heroine, not to be thwarted, tied her horse to a convenient limb, climbed a tree from which she could spy her errant charges, and then stole a small boat, and in full hunting regalia, rowed off after them, calling with her horn to persuade them to return to the fox’s scent.

This business of chasing deer with hounds was not only bad manners but conspicuously illegal, and hunting people went to considerable length to discourage the hounds from that practice. One of our hounds, Wrinkle, was especially fond of deer—in fact he was thrilled with hunting *anything*, and he rarely had had enough when it was time for everyone to “kennel up” and go home. He could scale the six foot high fence to escape from his run, and as we roaded hounds home from a meet, he was especially adept at making a dive for the bushes to prolong his hunting pleasure. A day or two later he would usually show up at the kennel, scrawny and scratched up but immensely pleased with himself after his marathon safari.

By that time, though I wasn’t a very polished rider, my ego (for a time) had overtaken my fears, and I was working for the hunt as a “whipper-in.” This entailed a lot of freelancing at the behest of the huntsman rather than just following along with the field behind everybody and his brother. The afternoon before this minor adventure, we had the hounds out for exercise—I, on Smitty, a quiet old school horse from the riding club. The macho half of the huntsman duo had decreed that Wrinkle would escape no more and had equipped me with a pistol—a revolver—loaded with ratshot. The idea was that when Wrinkle made a break for freedom, I would gallop off ahead of him, draw my weapon, and pepper him with pellets, thereby discouraging his flight and turning him back to the group. This technique was being explained to me even as I strapped the unfamiliar holster to my belt while standing, mounted, in the middle of the road.

“Try it once,” Bobby the Huntsman commanded. “Be sure your horse doesn’t mind the sound.”

I dutifully pointed the muzzle off towards Martha’s Vineyard and pulled the trigger. Poor Smitty leapt about four feet straight up into the air in shock but came down on the spot, showing no inclination to bolt or otherwise harm me. Thus, I was deemed ready to perform my task for real.

Next day we went hunting accompanied by a moderate-sized field of riders and a few more spectators following in cars. As the hunt ended, we had to road the hounds home for a mile or so. Most of the pack strolled along contentedly around the huntsman’s horse. I trailed the group to usher along any stragglers. Just then Wrinkle saw his opening and made a break for the thicket. Bobby, predictably, went nuts and started screaming for me to plunge in after the hound and retrieve him, an unlikely

scenario at best since hounds can move a lot faster through the underbrush than a horse and rider. Bushwhacking at high speed in fruitless pursuit, the branches slashing at my face, I made it a couple of hundred feet off the road and out of sight of my boss. I stopped, pulled the gun out, pointed it skyward and popped off a few rounds. Smitty did his four foot levitation trick, after which I picked my way back out to Bobby, shrugged my shoulders forlornedly, and explained that I'd almost caught Wrinkle but he just managed to slip away.

To be continued . . . .