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TALLY-HO, DUDE!

RIDING TO THE HOUNDS TAKES ON NEW LIFE WHEN THE QUARRY IS NOT FOX BUT WILD BOAR, AND THE LOCALE IS THE CALIFORNIA COUNTRYSIDE .

BY THOMAS MCINTYRE

Tradition ordains the naming of the hounds, even in California. In accordance with the tradition of *la chasse à courre*, whelps gotten by a sire from a different hunt kennel are named for him, while those from a sire from the home kennel are named for the dam. So at the kennel in the South Coast Range were hounds named J-Lo, Java, and Jewel, sired by Jolt from another kennel. And when the dam True bred a litter with a sire from her kennel, the offspring were christened Travis, Ted, and Timbuktu (true boar killers all, according to my friend Chip, *valet de limiers* of the hunt club). At first blush, California may seem the least likely locale in which to chance upon *valets de limiers* (that term

to be explained shortly). Yet there are places in the state, especially along the remarkably untamed Central Coast, where dogs and horses still hold considerable sway in the working, social, emotional, and sporting lives of the residents. And from there is not much of a jump, as it were, into the realm of hunting, as the English know the expression. Actually, the hunting that goes on in this relatively undetected California enclave, surrounded by the heightened cultural and political sensibilities that would doubtless howl in execration were its existence widely known (hence the deliberate failure to mention the hunt's name), is much more *à la manière française*, rather than English style, the crucial distinction being the presence of *le sanglier*, the wild pig.

The wild boar, along with the red stag, was the premier quarry of the mounted Old World hunter and his pack of hounds, reaching back at least to the fifth-century BC Greek huntsman, Xenophon. For English hunters, though, the native wild pig was extinguished in Britain around the fourteenth century, and deer were pro-

gressively driven into rougher, more unridable ground.

Hence, by the 1700s the English had to settle for the fox as the primary “beast of the chase,” giving rise to Oscar Wilde’s *bon mot* about fox hunting’s amounting to the “unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable.” French hunters, on the other hand (and it was with

the Norman Conquest that the French introduced hunting with horses into the British Isles), never settled for fox, and never had to.

While the French, in the epistolary words of the 18th century huntsman Peter Beckford, still pursued boar and stag “with the utmost splendor and magnificence,” the English transplanted fox hunting to their colonies in America. When aristocrat Robert Brooke sailed to Maryland in 1650 he brought with him a pack of foxhounds—claimed to be the first in North America. It is also believed that Brooke brought the first twenty-four red foxes to the New World as proper game for the hunt. But the most renowned American fox hunter was not Brooke, but George Washington.

Washington hunted all his life, until in his sixties he sustained a back injury in a horse fall and had to forego the sport. Before that, though, he rode to the hounds several times a day, when he could, even during the Revolutionary War. And Washington was merely the first of various fox hunters to occupy the White House, the succession running from Thomas Jefferson to Ronald Reagan, including at least one First Lady, Jacqueline Kennedy.

The Illinois-born Reagan took up fox hunting during his Hollywood days as a member of Los Angeles’s West Hills Hunt, which was founded right after World War II by a group of ex-infantry officers, including song-and-dance man Dan Dailey. Among the hunt club’s other members of note were tall-in-the-saddle Randolph Scott, Spencer Tracy, former Mexican cavalry *teniente* John Huston, George Raft, Burgess (“Cut me, Mick”) Meredith, José Ferrer, and most curiously the animator of *Bambi*, Walt Disney. Perhaps Uncle Walt kept a clear conscience because a lot of what the West Hills hounds chased across the thousands of rolling acres of open land that in those days sprawled south of Ventura Boulevard was drag lines of red-fox scent—no live fox viewed, let alone killed.

Of course, most of the foxes in California are the more primitive native gray species with a disheartening propensity for climbing trees if given

chase to. But California does have the far more challenging coyote and the not-to-be-disparaged jackrabbit. And more and more today, up the coast from the long vanished hunting fields of the West Hills Hunt, there is the wild hog.


Washington had hogs, but his diary spoke of being “plagued” when his hounds ran them instead of fox. But in California the wild pig is anything but a plague for hunters on horseback. And it is far from uneatable. And the early, verdant spring is the time for going in pursuit of them in the California hills uplifting from the Pacific littoral, whether with rifle or bow. Or with horse and hound.

My friend Chip, the aforementioned *valet de limiers* of the hunt club that dare not speak its name, invited me to accompany him on his duties on a late-March Saturday afternoon hunt toward the end of the hunt season—before the foxtails came up and entered the hounds’ ears. I’ve known Chip and his Paris-born wife Claire since we shot birds together in Senegal a few years ago. After that they went out West where Chip became the kennel huntsman and Claire the huntsman for a pack of hounds in, of all places, coastal California.

Chip’s position may be called kennel huntsman, kennelman, harbinger, or *valet de limiers*. Originally, he would have been in charge of the *limer*, the scenthound kept on a leash or *lyam*. Before the day’s hunt, the harbinger, to adopt the English term, would go out on foot with the *limer* to locate, or “harbor,” the stag or boar, so that when the hunt commenced, riders and trail hounds could be assured of a fresh track to follow. Now, Chip, while still harboring game (with more modern methods such as trail cams), sees to the care, feeding, and veterinary treatment of the resident dogs and horses. He also shadows the hunt in the field in his diesel Kubota, towing a straw-lined ambulance kennel for any hounds *hors de combat*, along with a cooler of iced refreshments, a Rossi single-shot .44 magnum rifle for the *coup de grâce*, should Claire’s dagger not conclude matters, and the brass circle of the hunting horn.



Surrounded by interested hounds, the hunters drag the wild boar out to the road.






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Although from her girlhood Claire was mad about horses and dogs, riding expertly and raising Afghans, she never rode to the hounds before coming to California, and then took to the role of huntsman, or *piqueux* in French, as if it had been her long undiscovered avatar. Now she directs the hounds, the hunters, and the whippers-in (the outriders whose task is to keep the pack from “rioting” off on false scents), and follows the pack into thick cover when the boar went *ferme roulant* (turning around in the covert to tangle up the taller hounds). When the boar is bayed up and held *aux écoutes* (“by the ears”), she, with her hair held neatly up in a black net, dispatches it with her *couteau de chasse*, frequently leaving Chip ashen and dismayed by the thought of having a wife capable of stabbing a hog to death.

Late on the morning of the hunt, Chip met me on the two-lane blacktop and led me past strawberry fields being picked up to the electric gate we opened and drove through. The ranch road wound through rows of pinot noir vines, futilely fenced against pigs, then onto an oak ridge where Chip stopped his ranch truck and walked back to show me the thousands of acres of grassy hills, stands of trees, and chaparral draws spread out below. This was where we would go a-huntin’.

We dropped off the ridge and drove past the spacious, immaculate, concrete-floored kennels—with grated gutters so they could be hosed out—then around to the stables and Chip and Claire’s house. Besides the stables, there was a large, oak-shaded pen in which a litter of black-and-white pups was being weaned, and a hog-skinning rack behind an empty chicken coop. The hunt began at 2:00.

The hunters towing horse trailers were already gathering, an hour early. This was the formal season, as opposed to the earlier “cub” or training season, so proper turnout was in evidence. The horses, of course, had brown English saddles. Some were actually unshod but wearing black rubber boots. The riders, both male and female, wore black boots with brown tops, canary or tattersall vests, white shirts, white breeches, and white or cream four-fold stock ties held with plain-gold horizontal pins. (The ties had a serious purpose—they could be pressed into service as

bandages or slings for riders, horses, or hounds, should the need arise.) The three most fundamental articles, though, without which hunters would most certainly not be hunters, were the cap, the coat, and the flask.

A remark is often passed that hunts are in fact drinking clubs with a horse problem. This is an example of chiasmus, more or less. But the stirrup-cup and flask are visible, if not prominent, accoutrements of the hunt. A rider’s flask may contain his signature concoction for sharing with fellow hunters; though ultimately a flask, in particular the distinctive bayonet type carried in a leather holster on the front of the saddle, seems more a convenient excuse for owning one more of the incomparably neat things associated with hunting, rather than an outright invitation to dipsomania. There were, in short, flasks in saddle holsters and vest pockets on the hunt, but beyond the odd ceremonial tipple the riders were quite unentertainingly abstemious.

This hunt is only one of two or three, out of more than a hundred and fifty formally recognized hunts in the USA, that pursues wild boar. So the two dozen or so properly turned out riders who assembled shortly before 2:00 by a concrete stock tank in the grass-covered pasture below the kennels should have more accurately been called hunters, not fox hunters. And some of these hunters were very much from the horsey set, with even a recognizable face from present-day Hollywood, but others seemed to hail from less rarified atmospheres, such as retired military, here because of the draw of being able to chase wild game on horseback. The owner of the ranch, and master of hounds, rode up and welcomed his guests. He briefly and cordially limned the basic rules of hunting etiquette (mostly, it seemed, for the benefit of a group of equestrian-school students riding to the hounds for the day), and then Claire rode up with the fifteen “couples” of hounds she and Chip had drafted (a total of thirty hounds), and the hunt was away.

Claire led the pack, followed closely by the genuine hunters, with the whippers-in flanking. A second cluster of less enthusiastic hunters trotted at a more leisurely pace behind, while a third group of the chattering classes poked along in the back. In a certain light, all the impractical scarlet jackets and hardened black caps, a score and a half

of hounds with no genuine purpose other than to run, tons of horseflesh serving no greater good than to clear fences, and costly tack without one single, solitary saddle horn to throw a dally around might have appeared not so much unspeakable as farcical. Until, that is, it was seen as all in manifest honor and respect of the centuries-long hunt and all that goes with it, including the game.

Even as Chip and I brought up the rear in the Kubota, we were part of the tradition of the followers of the hunt—this kind of hunting thought to be as much of a spectator sport as is soccer. As Chip drove, he pointed out the extensive damage done by the wild pigs to the land, the green draws and flats heaped with fresh turned dirt, like an artillery range after a barrage.

Claire took the pack onto the ridges and down through the croup-tall chamise, choosing her country, as Beckford advises, according to the wind. From our vantage on the opposite ridge, we saw the hounds vanishing and rematerializing among the brush, long tails flagging, and the horses planting their front hoofs deliberately as they carried the hunters downslope, whippers-in silhouetted on the skyline.

The hunters and pack went out of sight over a ridge, and Chip and I followed the ranch roads around toward the slope over which they would come. The hounds were not in headlong chase, “carrying forward the scent,” but were casting around for it, moving quietly in a predatory jog. Then they began to give voice.

Chip braked the Kubota, and we got out and listened. When we knew the hounds were onto something, Chip took up the hunting horn and sounded *La Vue*, summoning all the wayward hunters.

Chip and I drove on to where we could see Claire disappearing into the head-high chaparral on the backslope, ululating encouragement to the howling hounds. Then, loudest of all, came the grunting squeal of a wild boar.

The voices, human, hound, and pig, were mixed in a terrible chorus. All that could be seen was the shaking of the tops of the chamise, like wind

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shear over a wheat field. The shaking ran and spiraled through the brush, until the hounds bayed continuously, and the boar squealed in fury.

Chip was out of the Kubota and loading his Rossi rifle. He asked me to take the horn, and I also armed myself with my stout walking stick (actually a Korean fighting cane), and we hurried up the road and plunged into the chaparral.

We saw Claire's horse, then the snarled hounds and the black razor-back of the boar. Claire was on the ground, moving in with her knife. Before she could get to the boar, Chip climbed onto a pile of flattened brush above the caught pig and fired one .44 shot down into it.

"What are you doing?" Claire shouted, haloed in settling dust and pointing with her knife. "I was going to kill him."

Startled, Chip looked up.

"He was too big," he explained.

"I could have killed him," Claire declared with disdain, her accent seething with anger.

"He was too big," Chip pled ineffectually.

The hounds worried the dead boar, and a chastened Chip exchanged the

rifle for the horn and played *L'Hallali par terre*, announcing the kill. The boar topped two hundred fifty pounds, black as a Patey cap, with two inches of clean tusk showing above the gum line. Some of the hunters and whippers-in came into the brush and helped drag the carcass out to the road, to load into the Kubota. The panting hounds collected in the shade on the dirt road beside the boar, stretching out their bellies on the cool earth.

The hunters and horses gathered around the hounds and the kill, some of the horses unsure about the scent of pig. There was scant question that this boar would be fine eating. (In the evening we would come together at long plank tables in an oak grove by the stables for the hunt "breakfast," the name for all post-hunt meals, no matter the time of day. There would be calf fries from a branding the day before, chicken, salads, vegetables, wine, beer, fresh bread, and roast loin of wild boar—all that was necessary in order to understand why the French never could have been satisfied with the fox alone as the beast of chase.) We lifted the boar into the open back of the Kubota and went on hunting in the hills.

No more game was struck that afternoon, and after a stop at a waterhole for the horses and dogs, we headed back toward the kennels, stables, and breakfast.

Scarlet-coated hunters posted toward the sunset ahead of us. And they could, of course, look like a thoroughly silly parade—grownups playing dress-up. But that is what they were doing—and why not?


We jeopardize our complete humanity when we, even as adults, neglect the minimum daily requirement for play in our lives or the importance of our association with domestic and wild animals, and nature itself. Too often we are intimidated by the demands of correctness to admit how much playtime is involved in hunting, all hunting. But if we can see the legitimate worth of play, of an escape from sobriety in the existential sense, then riding to hounds, affiliating us as it does with dogs, horses, big game, challenge, risk, excitement, and food, would have to constitute—even with the ridiculous getups and customs—one of the very best forms of play.

There seemed to be something else about this kind of hunting that I could not quite put a finger on. There was a word for it, for this union of humans and animals, of prey, predators, and pursuers. It created a unit, an organism. What was that called?

The master rode up. He escorted the youthful mistress of the equestrian school. She rode a jittery Arabian tossing its itty-bitty head and called the hounds "dogs." She had not been present at the kill and looked at the boar in the back of the Kubota with the inkling of an arched eyebrow. Chip merrily told the tale of the hunt and the kill, boasting not excessively about his brave wife's performance as the *piqueux*, while I acted as color commentator.

The headmistress, whose mouth had pursed into a moue of a smile as she listened to the story, cocked her head.

"My," she said languorously, "how tribal."

And as she and the master rode off to the stables, I thought, *Yes, that's it. That's the word precisely.* 



Claire and Chip with a large wild boar taken on an earlier hunt.