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Cross-Country Riding in America

THE title of this article is chosen especially to emphasize the fact that what is often spoken of as fox-hunting around New York is not fox-hunting at all, in the English sense of the term, but an entirely different, although allied, form of sport; namely, riding to draghounds. In the Northeastern States riding to hounds is a sport of recent growth, but during the past decade it has taken a constantly increasing hold among young men fond of the more adventurous kinds of athletic pursuits, and there are now at least seven firmly established hunts, the Elkridge in Maryland, the Rosetree near Philadelphia, the Genesee Valley in Central New York, the Essex County in New Jersey, the Meadowbrook and Rockaway on Long Island, and finally the one in the neighborhood of Boston, in many ways among the very best, the members of which are thorough sportsmen and both good and bold riders, but who have seen fit to curse themselves with the grotesque title of the "Myopia" hunt. There are also two clubs in Canada, the Montreal and the Toronto. The Elkridge pack, the oldest of all, hunts wild foxes, both the gray and the red; the Genesee Valley and the Myopia hounds are also used mainly after Reynard himself; but at least nine out of ten runs with the other packs are after a drag. Most of the hunts are in the neighborhood of great cities, and are mainly kept up by young men who come from them. A few of these are men of leisure, who can afford to devote their whole time to pleasure; but much the larger number are men in business, who work hard and are obliged to make their sports accommodate themselves to their more serious occupations. Once or twice a week they can get off for an afternoon's ride across country, and they then wish to be absolutely certain of having their run, and of having it at the appointed time; and the only way to insure this is to have a drag-hunt. It is not the lack of foxes that has made the sport on this side of the water take the form of draghunting so much as the fact that the majority of those who keep it up are hard-working business men who wish to make the most out of every moment of the little time they can spare from their regular occupations. A single ride across country will yield more exercise, fun, and excitement than can be got out of a week's decorous and dull riding in the park, and a good many young fellows have waked up to this fact. One such finds that a good horse will stand hunting two afternoons a week; and so he will get perhaps twenty-five runs in a year, without very much expense, without neglecting his business, and with the knowledge that he is not only laying in a stock of health, but is also enjoying what is certainly the most exciting and perhaps also the manliest kind of amusement to be found east of the Mississippi River.

Unfortunately, so far the farmers themselves have taken little part or interest in the sport; but this remark does not hold true of the Genesee Valley, where the hunt of which Mr. Wadsworth is master is established more firmly and on a more healthy and natural basis than is the case with any of the others except the Elkridge. At Genesee the bulk of almost every field is composed of the hard-riding farmers from the country round about, who, be it said in passing, are beginning to find the breeding and selling of good hunters a very valuable part of their stock-

raising, for their horses have already won for themselves the reputation of being uncommonly good fencers. Many of our crack Long Island hunters have come from the Genesee Valley, and, indeed, only high-jumping horses can live with Mr. Wadsworth's hounds, as the country is very stiff, though the pace is not fast.

My own hunting has been done with the Meadowbrook hounds, in the northern part of Long Island. There are plenty of foxes around us, both red and gray, but partly for the reasons given above, and partly because the covers are so large and so nearly continuous, they are not often hunted, although an effort is always made to have one run every week or so after a wild fox, in order to give a chance for the hounds to be properly worked and to prevent the runs from becoming a mere succession of steeple-chases. The sport is mainly drag-hunting, and is most exciting, as the fences are high and the pace fast. It has very little in common with English foxhunting, however, beyond the fact that both call for jumping and galloping. We lack the variety which gives such a charm to English hunting, where water-jumps, hedges, ditches, and fences alternate with each other, and where a man can never tell what is coming next; nor is there with us the chance for a rider to show so much head-work in getting along, and of course there is no opportunity at all to avail one's self of knowledge of the habits of a hunted animal. But skillful and daring horsemanship is called for quite as much, if not more, while drag-hunting, especially over such an exceedingly stiff country as that along the north shore of Long Island. The land is pretty well wooded, and generally rolling or hilly, except when we come out on the great stretches of level plain towards the middle of the island. The fields are small and bounded almost exclusively by high posts and rails, so that, although we occasionally meet a stone wall or hedge, our jumping is almost exclusively over timber. Some of these fences are of the kind called "snake" or "Virginia" zigzags, with a pair of upright poles at every angle crossing each other to bind in the rails. Such a fence may be very high, and, of course, the horse has to be brought up to it diagonally, so as to face fairly the panel he is to take; but if struck, the rails generally give way. The common kind of fence, however, is a much stiffer affair, consisting of mortised posts and rails; the posts are heavy, upright logs, and the rails, three, four, or five in number, so stout as not to break unless a horse strikes them uncommonly fair and hard. Three-fourths of our fences are of this sort, which average somewhat better than four feet in height, with an occasional rasper that will come well up to five. The country being open, and the fences as described, there is nothing to check the speed of the hounds, that run like smoke; and towards the end of the season the pace becomes terrific. By the way, it may be as well to mention, for the benefit of those foggy-brained individuals who appear to have got it into their heads that drag-hunting is a rather tame amusement as compared with hunting a wild animal, that no other kind of riding, with the sole exception of steeple-chasing, calls for such hard galloping and high jumping as does riding to drag-hounds. Indeed, the trouble with drag-hunting, as we now carry it on, is its tendency to become more and more like a steeple-chase, in which none but the very best horses can take part; and the men who are sincerely desirous of seeing the sport become popular should do all they can to guard against this tendency, and to make the runs such that moderately fair riders on decent horses will be able to have their share of the fun. Drag-hunting will not be fairly established until we see at the meets large fields of horsemen who like the exercise of riding, like to see the hounds work, and enjoy the hours they are spending in the open air, but who cannot afford to purchase the animals to carry them across country at a racing pace, or who cannot run the risk of being laid up and kept away from their business by an accident. At present the field usually consists of a score or so of young men, all of them very well mounted, many of them good, and most of them hard riders, and almost every one bound to be just as well up in the first

flight as his horse can carry him. This is just as it should be, as far as it goes; but in addition to this group of neck-or-nothing men there ought to be, but there is not, a large representation of the men and women who are more modest in their ambition. The men who ride hard and straight should of course form the nucleus of every hunt; but they should only be a fractional part of those who come out to the meets, for the chief charm of the sport is that almost every man who rides at all can, if he chooses, enjoy it after his own fashion.

The sport being so new with us in the North, and the country hunted over being generally so very stiff, there has been a good deal of trouble about getting proper horses. Now, however, the demand has created a supply, and first-class hunters are to be had by those who can pay fair prices. The Long Island country needs a peculiar style of horse, the first requisite being that he shall be a very good and high timber-jumper. Quite a number of crack English and Irish hunters have at different times been imported, and some of them have turned out pretty well; but when they first come over they are utterly unable to cross our country, blundering badly at the high timber. Few of them have done as well as the American horses. Very probably English thoroughbreds in a grass country, and over the peculiar kind of obstacles they have on the other side of the water, would gallop away from a field of our Long Island horses; for they have speed and bottom, and are great weight-carriers. But on our own ground, where the cross-country riding is more like leaping a succession of five- and six-bar gates than anything else, they do not as a rule, in spite of the enormous prices paid for them, show themselves equal to the native stock. The highest recorded jump, as is well known, was made by the American horse "Leo." Since I have been with the Meadowbrook hounds they have been hunted in succession by Messrs. Morgan, Belmont, and Hitchcock. If the pace is fast and the fences high, any man who will keep in the same field with either of the above-mentioned gentlemen must have moderately good nerve and a first-rate horse; and this is especially true if the animal to be followed is Mr. Morgan's "King Cole," of Kentucky blood, Mr. Belmont's "Carmelite," a West Virginian horse, or one of Mr. Hitchcock's Genesee hunters. The trotting stock, rather curiously, is apt to turn out excellent timber-jumpers. There is much of this blood in Central New York, and very many of our best horses come from there, and were originally intended for use in light wagons. It is impossible to come up at full speed and "fly" a high post-and-rails, in the way a hedge, brook, or low fence can be gone at; the horse generally has to be brought to a canter or even a trot, and then bucks over the obstacle by sheer strength of loins and haunches. An animal with trotting-blood in him seems to take naturally to such work.

A horse thought to be of no account whatever may unexpectedly turn out to be a good jumper; more than once I have known a solemn animal, taken out of a buggy, fairly to astonish everybody by the indifference and quiet with which he went over anything he came to. But, to keep up with the Meadowbrook pack, pace and bottom are needed as well as jumping power; and a common, coarse horse, even if a clever fencer, is very apt to be left behind when there is any galloping, and is also apt to shut up before getting to the end of a severe run. Most of the crack hunters have a great deal of thoroughbred blood in them. The main difficulty with our horses so far has been to find weight-carriers, and mere size is not by any means always a safe test in this respect. Occasionally a small horse will prove able to stand a much heavier weight than one would think; I have in mind now a little fifteen-two sorrel thoroughbred, that carries one of the heaviest, as well as one of the hardest, riders in the whole hunt well up in the front rank, once or twice a week throughout the entire season.

Most of the meets are held within a dozen miles or so of the kennels: at Farmingdale, Woodbury, Wheatly, Locust Valley, Syosset, or near any one of twenty other queer, quaint, old

Long Island hamlets. They are almost always held in the afternoon, the business men who have come down from the city jogging over behind the hounds to the appointed place, where they are met by the men who have ridden over direct from their country-houses. If the meet is an important one, there may be a crowd of onlookers in every kind of trap, from a four-in-hand drag to a spider-wheeled buggy drawn by a pair of long-tailed trotters, the money value of which probably surpasses many times that of the two best hunters in the whole field. Now and then a breakfast will be given the hunt at some country-house, when the whole day will be devoted to the sport, and perhaps after wild foxes in the morning there will be a drag in the afternoon.

After one meet, at Sagamore Hill, I had the curiosity to go on foot over the course we had taken, measuring the jumps; for it is very difficult to form a good estimate of a fence's height when in the field, and five feet of timber seems a much easier thing to take when sitting around the fire after dinner than it does when actually faced while the hounds are running. On this particular hunt in question we ran about ten miles, at a rattling pace, with only two checks, crossing somewhat more than sixty fences, most of them post-and-rails, stiff as steel, the others being of the kind called "Virginia " or "snake," and not more than ten or a dozen in the whole lot under four feet in height. The highest measured five feet and half an inch, two others were four feet eleven, and nearly a third of the number averaged about four and a half. There were also several rather awkward doubles. When the hounds were cast off some forty riders were present, but the first fence was a savage one, and stopped all who did not mean genuine hard going. Twenty-six horses crossed it, one of them ridden by a lady. A mile or so farther on, before there had been a chance for much tailing, we came to a five-bar gate, out of a road a jump of just four feet five inches from the take-off. Up to this, of course, we went one at a time, at a trot or hand-gallop, and twenty -five horses cleared it in succession without a single refusal and with but one mistake; which speaks pretty well for the mounts we were riding. Owing to the severity of the pace, combined with the average height of the timber (although no one fence was of especially noteworthy proportions), a good many falls took place, resulting in an unusually large percentage of accidents. The master partly dislocated one knee, another man broke two ribs, and another -- the present writer -- broke his arm. However, almost all of us managed to struggle through to the end in time to see the death; and as the score of battered riders turned their horses' heads homeward, I could not help thinking that we looked a good deal as if we had been taking part in some feat of arms as gentle and joyous as that of Ashby-de-la-Zouche. But it would be very unfair to think the sport especially dangerous on account of the occasional accidents that happen. A man who is fond of riding, but who sets a good deal of value, either for the sake of himself, his family, or his business, upon his neck and limbs, can hunt with almost perfect safety if he gets a quiet horse, a safe fencer, and does not try to stay in the front rank. Most accidents occur to men on green or wild horses, or else to those who keep up in front only at the expense of pumping their mounts; and a fall with a done-out beast is always peculiarly disagreeable. Most falls, however, do no harm whatever to either horse or rider, and after they have picked themselves up and shaken themselves, the couple ought to be able to go on just as well as ever. Of course a man who wishes to keep in the first flight must expect to face a certain number of tumbles; but even he probably will not be hurt at all, and he can avoid many a mishap by easing up on his horse whenever he can, that is, by always taking a gap when possible, going at the lowest panel of every fence, and not calling on the old fellow for all there is in him unless it cannot possibly be avoided. It must be remembered that hard riding is a very different thing from good riding. A good rider to hounds must also at times ride hard; but the furious galloper who goes headlong at

everything is quite likely to be exceptionally brainless rather than exceptionally brave, and may in addition know nothing whatever of horsemanship.

Cross-country riding in the rough is not a difficult thing to learn; always provided the would-be learner is gifted with or has acquired a fairly stout heart, for a constitutionally timid person is peculiarly out of place in the hunting field. A really finished cross-country rider, a man who combines hand and seat, heart and head, is of course rare; and though there are a number of such among the men who follow the Meadowbrook hounds, yet their standard is too high for most of us to hope to reach. But it is comparatively easy to acquire a light hand and a capacity to sit fairly well down in the saddle; and when a man has once got these, he will find no especial difficulty in following the hounds on a trained hunter; and after he has once taken to the sport, he will hardly give it up again of his own free will, for there is no other that is so manly and health-giving, while at the same time yielding so much fun and excitement. While he is learning horsemanship, by the way, the tyro had best also learn to show a wise tolerance for styles of riding other than that he adopts. At some of the meets, although unfortunately not by any means at all of them, he will see a few outsiders, who are not regular members of the hunt; and because one of these, perhaps, rides an army saddle, wears a slouch hat, and has a long-tailed horse, the man whose rig is of the swellest very probably looks down on him, while the slouch-hatted horseman, in return, and quite as illogically, affects to despise, as a mark of effeminacy, the faultless get-up of the regular hunt member. The feeling is quite as absurd on one side as on the other, and is in violation of the cardinal American doctrine of "live and let live." It is perfectly right and proper that the man who wishes to and can afford it should have both himself and his horse turned out in the very latest style; only he should then make up his mind to live well in the front, for it is hardly the thing for a man with a very elaborate get-up to be always pottering about in the rear or riding along roads. On the other hand, there are plenty of men who cannot or will not come except in the dress which happens to suit their own ideas; and certainly their appearance does not concern anybody else but themselves. It is the true policy to welcome warmly any man who cares for the sport, provided he is plucky, good-tempered, and rides his own line; and whether he wears a stiff silk hat, or a broad-brimmed felt one, has nothing whatever to do with the question.

Again, the cross-country rider is apt to look with contempt upon what is commonly called school-riding; a contempt which can only arise from ignorance, as anyone must acknowledge who has seen the really wonderful feats of horsemanship performed by a first-class school-rider. In return, the latter, with equal injustice, often speaks of riding to hounds as if it merely called for a kind of half-barbarous capacity to urge a horse along in any kind of way over obstacles. But aside from all questions of comparative skill, the attraction of cross-country riding arises from its surroundings, and from the excitement attendant upon it. A sharp gallop in the crisp fall weather, under the stress of an eager though friendly rivalry with a dozen other well-mounted men, crashing along among the half-leafless trees or over the brown fields, facing stiff timber without flinching, when the sky overhead is of the brilliant, metallic blue scarcely seen save in America, and the foliage that is still left on the trees shows crimson and yellow, dull red and russet brown - such a gallop, I say, will make a man's heart leap and his nerves thrill and tingle with an almost fierce pleasure that could not be given by the performance of the most difficult feat known to the admirers of the *haute école*.

Last spring I had to leave the East in the midst of the hunting season to join a roundup in the cattle country of western Dakota, and it was curious to compare the totally different styles of riding of the cowboys and the cross-country men. A stock-saddle weighs thirty or forty pounds

instead of ten or fifteen, and needs an utterly different seat from that adopted in the East. A cowboy rides with very long stirrups, sitting forked well down between his high pommel and cantle, and depends greatly upon mere balance. In cutting out a steer from a herd, in sitting a bucking bronco, in stopping a night stampede of many hundred maddened animals, or in the performance of a hundred other feats of reckless and daring horsemanship, the cowboy is absolutely unequalled ; and when he has his own horse gear he sits his animal with the ease of a centaur, and yet he is curiously helpless the first time he gets astride of one of the small Eastern saddles. Last summer, while purchasing cattle in Iowa, one of my ranch foremen had to get on an ordinary saddle to ride out of town and see a bunch of steers. He is perhaps the best rider on the ranch, and will without hesitation mount and master beasts that I doubt if the boldest rider in one of our Eastern hunts would care to tackle; yet his uneasiness on the new saddle was fairly comical. At first he did not dare to trot, and the least plunge of the horse bid fair to unseat him, nor did he begin to get accustomed to the situation until the very end of the journey. In fact, the two kinds of riding are so very different that a man only accustomed to one feels almost as ill at ease when he first tries the other as if he had never sat on a horse's back before. It is rather funny to see a man who only knows one kind, and is conceited enough to think that that is really the only kind worth knowing, when first he is brought into contact with the other. Two or three times I have known men try to follow hounds on stock saddles, which are about as ill-suited for the purpose as they well can be; while it is even more laughable to see some young fellow from the East or from England, who thinks he knows entirely too much about horses to be taught by barbarians, attempt in his turn to do cow-work with his ordinary riding or hunting rig. Each kind is best in its own place; and the man only accustomed to one will at first find himself at a disadvantage when he tries the other. It must be said, however, that in all probability cowboys would learn to ride well across country much sooner than the average cross-country rider would master the dashing and peculiar style of horsemanship shown by those whose life business it is to guard the wandering herds of the great Western plains. A cavalry officer trained at West Point is, perhaps, for all-round work, not unlikely to surpass as a horseman both cowboy and fox-hunter. Riding to hounds has the immense advantage over most other athletic sports, that it implies in those who follow it the possession of moral even more than of physical good qualities. Of course in hunting a man has to have a good deal of skill and a certain amount of wiry toughness and endurance, and his physique and health, which should be already good, will rapidly become much better; but there is no need for anything like the bodily development necessary to one who wishes to become a crack oarsman, for instance; while on the other hand there is an amount of pluck and nerve needed which neither rowing nor any other form of athletics, except, perhaps, football, calls for. Moreover, hunting can be enjoyed in different ways and degrees by almost everybody who has a horse, while but a limited number can take part in a boat-race or even a baseball contest. It is really an essentially democratic amusement, where every one stands on the same plane. If this is once realized, and if men get to appreciate that every one who can get on a horse can take such part as his powers and tastes incline him to, in one of the most manly and healthy of outdoor sports, hunting can hardly fail to become popular. Moreover, the bolder, wilder spirits, certain to be found in any community, who in time of war develop into men like Ulric Dahlgren or young Gushing, but who in time of peace are apt to go to the bad merely from the revolt against the decorous tameness of their life, find in hunting an outlet for their superabundant energies. If in 1860 riding to hounds had been at the North, as it was at the South, a national pastime, it would not have taken us until well on towards the middle of the war before we were able to develop a cavalry capable of withstanding the shock of the Southern horsemen.

As is always the case when an attempt is made to introduce anything new or out of the common, the effort to make riding to hounds a recognized amusement in the Northern States has given rise to a great deal of criticism, mostly of a singularly senseless sort, characterized by the sheerest and densest ignorance of the whole subject. Much of this criticism comes from men themselves too weak or too timid to do anything needing daring or involving the slightest personal risk, and who are actuated simply by jealousy of those who possess the attributes that they themselves lack. A favorite cry is that hunting is with us artificial and un-American. Of course it is artificial; so is every other form of sport in civilized countries, from tobogganing or ice yachting to a game of baseball. Anything more artificial than shooting quail on the wing over a trained setter could not be imagined. Hunting large game in the West with the rifle undoubtedly calls for the presence of a greater number of manly and hardy qualities in those who take part in it than is the case with riding to drag-hounds; but, unless the quarry is the grizzly bear, it does not need nearly as much personal daring. To object to hunting because they hunt in England is about as sensible as to object to lacrosse because the Indians play it. We do not have to concern ourselves in the least as to whether a pastime originated with Indians, or Englishmen, or Hottentots, for that matter, so long as it is attractive and health-giving. It goes without saying that the man who takes to hunting, not because it is a manly sport, but because it is done abroad, is a foolish snob; but, after all, he stands about on the same intellectual level with the man who refuses to take it up because it happens to be liked on the other side of the water.

To say the sport is un-American seems particularly absurd to such of us as happen to be in part of Southern blood, and whose forefathers, in Virginia, Georgia, or the Carolinas, have for six generations followed the fox with horse and hound.