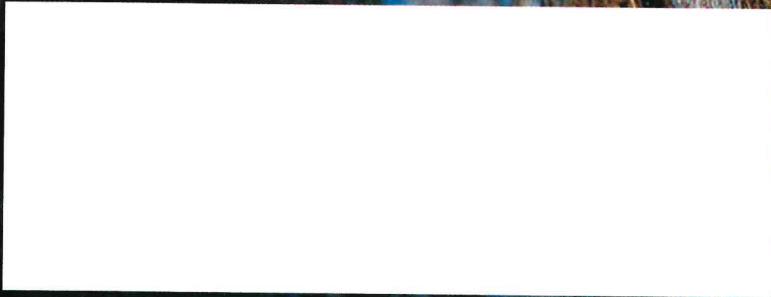


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No Blank Days

A drag hunting seminar
draws hound enthusiasts to Aiken.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL STERN

“I am a hound nerd,” confessed MFHA Executive Director David Twiggs as he opened a drag-hunting weekend seminar in Aiken, South Carolina.

Discussions and events that followed made it abundantly clear that for pilgrims who came from all over the United States to participate, foxhunting is indeed a canine sport.



AIKEN WAS THE RIGHT VENUE for a focus on drag hunting. Aiken Hounds is the oldest drag hunt in the nation, having recently concluded its 105th season, including two drags every week in the 2100-acre paradise of horse-friendly trails and fences known as Hitchcock Woods.

The weekend was all about the hounds. "I love going through the stud book to trace the family lineage of outstanding hounds," Twiggs said; and among those who shared their hunt-field experiences, enthusiasm for the skills of these creatures who lead us on the chase was radiant. Yes, they are the fundamental tool of the sport, but for many who spoke, they are its *raison d'être*.

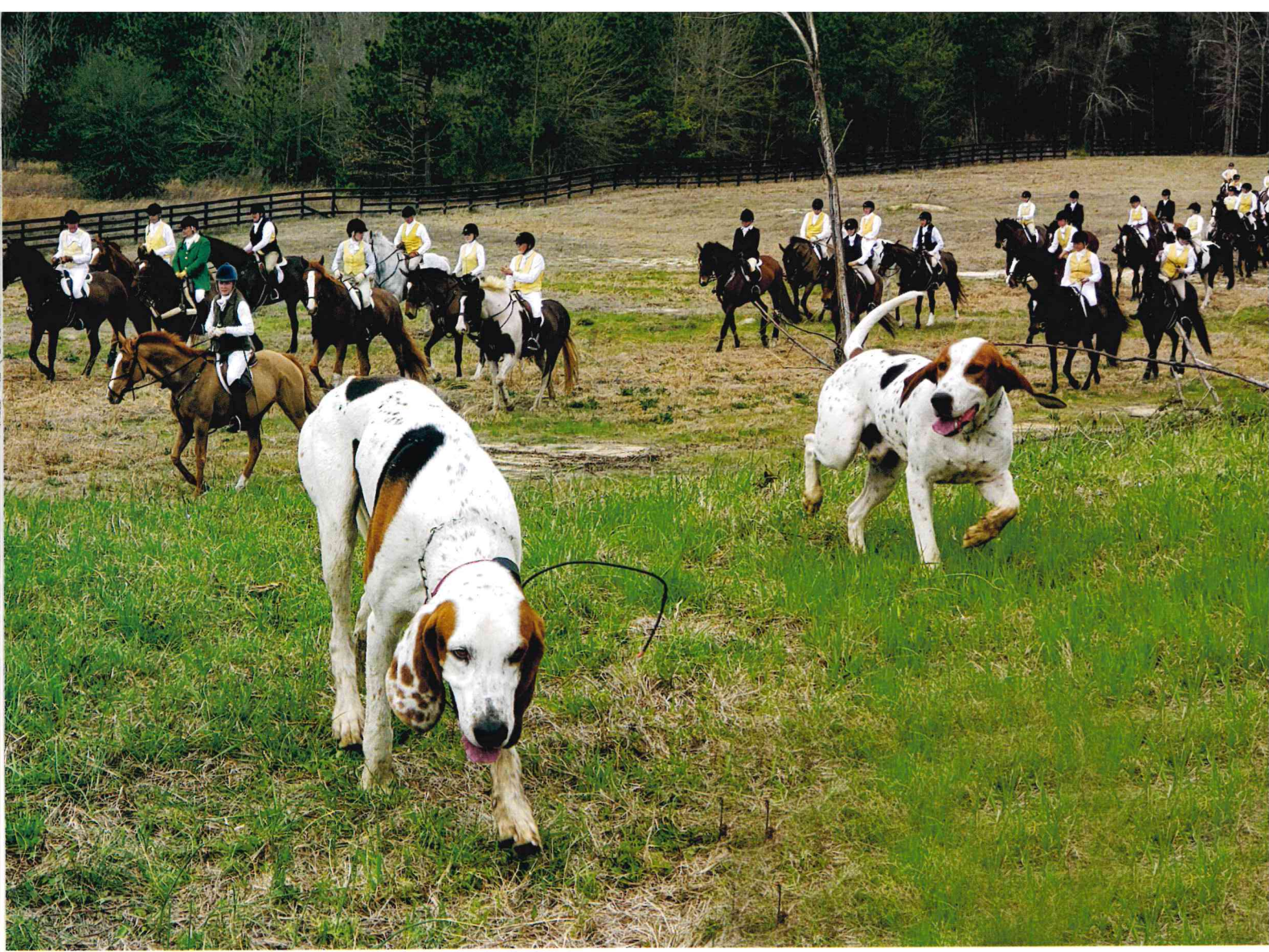
Randy Wolcott, who is Aiken Hounds' "fox" (the person who lays down the scent for a drag hunt), said, "I love being at the checks, because there I get to play with the hounds and praise them. That's my favorite part. It is so great to hear them echoing through the woods, to listen to their thunder. I wish I could see how the hounds run my lines, to make sure they stay true." He is too busy laying the next line to stand back and observe, but at one point in the presentation, Wolcott beamed ear to ear as he watched a video made by a member of the hunt field that showed the hounds in full cry, running straight towards the camera then, suddenly, veering 90 degrees and charging off into the woods. "That's exactly how I laid it," Wolcott said.

Some of the subjects covered during the seminar are not unique to drag hunting — they apply to live mounted hunting as

well. Participants spoke of pace and spacing among mounted riders — of not following too close but not leaving a gap; of how to deal with thrusters and other problem members of the field ("with a smile," advised Aiken Hounds first flight Field Master Karl McMillan), as well as with problem horses. There were discussions about technology in the field (radios, collars, GPS) as well as about such very practical matters as fundraising, landowner relations, and ways to increase membership, especially among a younger crowd. On that last subject, Aiken Hounds huntsman Katherine Gunter said that hounds are an especially good way to get juniors involved. "They develop a bond with a hound, then they want to see it hunt," she said.

Elaine Ittleman, ex-MFH of Green Mountain Hounds, reminded listeners that one-third of a hound's brain is dedicated to smell and that, "We're not teaching them anything that they don't already know. We're just providing them the opportunity to do it." Jeff Bates, who comes from a canine search-and-rescue background and is the fox for Sewickley Hunt, advised that the long, floppy ears of a foxhound (as well as of a basset hound, beagle, and bloodhound) serve the vital purpose of fanning scent up towards the canine nose as it moves along.

Beyond such fundamentals of all hunting with hounds, issues unique to drag hunting were front and center. "Sometimes we need to remind members that we are hunting," said Terry Hook, MFH of Green Mountain Hounds. "This is not a trail ride with



Above, Aiken Hounds heading home. Guests (including David Twiggs, executive director) enjoyed a traditional Low Country boil. Right: Presenters John Tabachka (hunter from Sewickley Hunt), Katherine Gunter (hunter from Aiken Hounds), and Ginny Zukatynski (MFH Old North Bridge Hounds)





dogs. People need to listen, not blab with each other. An unruly field is every bit as unsafe in a drag as in a live hunt.”

Some talk was technical, such as the exact composition of the scent. Whereas fox urine is traditional, Ittleman recommends anisette: “It smells way better; it encourages good cry; not being an animal smell, it tends to prevent riot; and ... you can drink it if you get thirsty while laying the line!”

Bates advised how important it is to dilute the scent. If it’s too strong, it can pollute a hound’s nose. He noted that it is common — for just that reason — to see hounds following a scent to the side of precisely where it has been laid, thus maintaining their noses’ peak sensitivity. In his search-and-rescue work, he often follows trails that are 48 hours old or more; and several of the veteran hunters in attendance remembered when it was common for a drag huntsman to lay a line the night before, then hunt it the next morning. A few folks suggested that, in fact, some hounds really are following the scent of the human fox as much as the line of scent he is laying.

On the other hand, too little scent — or scent that gets swirled away by wind or evaporated by hard sunshine — can lead to riot. “Leave too much of a gap in the line,” Bates cautioned, “and you suddenly can have a pack that’s hunting live.”

What, exactly, makes a great drag hound? Voice, all agreed. “I want their cry to shake the leaves off the trees,” said huntsman Katherine Gunther. “PMDs [Penn Marydels] and American hounds have stunning voices. If a hound doesn’t speak, he won’t be with us for long.”

Some hounds have good cry; others do not, but John Tabachka, Sewickley’s huntsman, said that confidence makes a tremendous difference. He described drafting young hounds who may hunt well, but don’t speak much. As they hunt more, learn their job, and are praised for good performance, the confidence they develop frequently results in resonating cry.

Tabachka also noted that soundness is essential, perhaps even more important than in a live-hunt hound. “Remember, live packs tend to go at a slower pace, at least some of the time. They’re walking, waiting to draw. But drag hounds don’t rest, except at a break. Once they’re cast, they are on the move.”

Katherine Gunther added that because drags frequently are staged in tight territory, biddability is an essential quality in a drag hound. “When you say stop, they need to stop,” she said.

“That is one advantage of drag over live hunting,” said Aiken Hounds MFH Larry Byers. “We can assure landowners that we won’t go where we’re not supposed to.”

One peril unique to drag hunting familiar territory is that hounds learn to anticipate where they’ll be going. “We need always to change it up,” Wolcott said. “For the members, yes, but also for the hounds if we want to keep them sharp. You need to force them to question where you are going, not anticipate it. You need to create problems for them to figure out so they don’t get bored. Keep it interesting, try to outsmart them (not easy!) by extending a line beyond where they went last time, by taking them towards last week’s check, but then leading them off in a new direction.”

“The whole idea of drag hunting is to see the hounds work,” said Karl McMillan. “We know where they’re going, so we can do that for all members of the field. After all, everyone is here for the same thing, which is to watch keen hounds at their best.”

That night at a South Carolina Lowcountry Boil picnic on the grass of Sandhurst, a stately home from Aiken’s winter-colony heyday, one visitor reminded tablemates, “When you drag hunt, there’s no such thing as a blank day.” 🍷

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