

The Skycastle French Hounds—A Great Way To Enjoy Hunting with Hounds!

Hunting on foot with a pack of hounds is a sport that has been pursued for centuries—in recorded history from the days of Xenophon to modern times. Most people are unaware of this very ancient and enjoyable form of field sport. The Basset and the Beagle are the hounds of choice, as they are excellent low-scenting hounds that have been bred and worked as packs for generations, and have excellent voices, or cry, when in pursuit of their quarry. In the United States, the quarry is usually the Cottontail Rabbit. The cottontail can give a sporting account of himself when chased. He is very quick, and will leap and double during the run, giving plenty of opportunity for spectators (the “Field”) to see hounds have to really work to keep in touch with him and puzzle out his tricks to elude them and get safely down a hole. Their eyesight is not sharp like a greyhound’s, so they cannot see their quarry for more than a few dozen yards, even less in an overgrown field. So the opportunity to see and walk over lovely countryside while watching the eager little hounds casting, pick up the scent, work it up to a rabbit and then chase it to ground in glorious cry is ample reward to the followers of a pack of bassets. The sport is the



find and chase, observe and enjoy, and an exhilarating day in the field with like-minded lovers of hounds and the countryside.

The Skycastle French Hounds have been hunting as a pack in Chester County since 1948 when John and Elizabeth Streeter started with AKC Bassets in Chester Springs. In the 1970s Mrs. Streeter, wishing to improve the working ability of the pack, got an English Hunting Basset outcross from the Tewksbury Foot. Liking the occasional rough-coated throwback that turned up, she imported Griffon Vendéen Bassets from England and France to cross with her hounds. After Jim Scharnberg became Master in 1987, he began importing hunting Griffons Vendéens in whelp, and proven stallions, from one of the best hunting breeders in France to develop a pack of purebred hounds. The results have been very good indeed, and hunting 3 days a week has proven that the purebreds work well as pack hounds. They are perfectly suited to Chester County’s rough, briary woods and fields. Their harsh, heavy coats protect them, and they will attack the toughest cover with élan to get rabbits moving. They are great fun to watch. Hunting with these hounds is never dull!

On any given Sunday, you can find our group of from 20 to 60, depending on the weather, following our beloved “fuzzies” somewhere in Chester County. They enjoy the hunt and the open countryside, seeking a relaxed, sociable way to share some healthy exercise with tea to follow. The only requirements for following our pack are hiking shoes or boots and tough clothing, reasonably good physical condition, a small “capping fee” (as we are a subscription pack and all contribute to expenses) and a real interest in seeing hounds at work in their true element.

Since 1995 we have sponsored a conservation tent at the Ludwigs Corner Horse Show to acquaint longtime locals and newcomers to the area with our sport, and our efforts to preserve open space, protect watersheds and the historic features of Chester County. The Green Valleys Association, the French and Pickering Creeks Conservation Trust and several other packs have joined with us. At each show we parade our hounds and distribute county and state land preservation kits. We have become a fixture of the show. In 1998, Skycastle was awarded a Certificate of Appreciation by Chester County for our work to preserve open space and water resources. In 2008 our 60th anniversary, we received a citation from the Pennsylvania State Senate in recognition of our longtime conservation efforts. Conserving open space and healthy habitat and watersheds insures land for our sport. By making sure that our hounds,



staff and field respect every property owner’s land, be it 300 acres or one, we insure the privilege of hunting there again. As naturalists who love the land and the whole fabric of the countryside, we are acting to help protect the health of all wildlife and people in the county.

Please come out with us on a hunt and see for yourselves the beauty of the land. Take a step aside in time on a Sunday afternoon to share the

camaraderie and traditions of our sport. A good hunting day is a celebration of life in the Pennsylvania countryside. All are very welcome.

To get a feel for what will happen when you go out Basseting for the first time, let's take a look at a really fine day with hounds. The Master is the person who manages the pack and arranges the day's hunt. The Field Master controls the Field, which is the group watching the hunt. The Huntsman works with the pack of hounds and leads them to start a search for a rabbit. Whippers-In are members of his staff, who range wide of the pack to keep hounds from going off on 'riot'—deer, fox, birds or stray dogs and cats—in the course of the hunt. Our uniform—hunt cap, green coat with the collar colors of our hunt, white shirt and stock tie, and white trousers—identifies us as the hunt staff of the Skycastle French Hounds. The coat is green, rather than red, as we hunt rabbit or hare, rather than fox. The horn calls and voice com-



mands we use are directions for the hounds and staff during the course of a hunt.

You have been talked into coming out by a friend who regularly follows a pack, or have heard about the sport and made inquiries. And now you are at the Meet, or starting point listed on your fixture card, for the day's hunt, comfortably ahead of the appointed time. It is usually the property of a friend or member of the Hunt. Permission has been secured of surrounding owners to hunt over their land as well. First one, two, then a line of cars begins pulling up and people of all ages pour out and gather around awaiting the arrival of hounds and the staff. Don't be backward about introducing yourself. You'll find a warm welcome. Wait a minute--is that baying I hear? Yes, here comes the hound trailer and what a grand racket they make! Didn't think they'd be quite so loud, did you? The staff quickly position themselves around the tailgate for hounds to be unloaded from the trailer.

Here they come! What a grand sight! There is only one time you first see a pack turned out, and you'll never forget it. I hope your first 'view' is as satisfying as mine was.

"Hold up, Salsa! Pack up, pack up!" The Whippers-In get hounds under loose control away from the road while the Huntsman and Field Master greet the Field, and newcomers are introduced. Then, after allowing a few minutes for late-comers, the Huntsman and Whips move the pack off. The Master gives a last word or two of instruction to the Field, and the day's sport begins. As we move up the hill from the house and trudge around a strip of winter wheat, it's a good time to take a look at hounds. They're settling down and taking a sharp look around as they get their noses down. There's a happy yip or two; sterns are up and switching. There are five and a half couple (eleven) out today and they look like they mean business. The young entry have got over their early season's flightiness and are settling in pretty well with the pack. They must learn an awful lot this season in the way of control and eagerness in covering the ground as a team to earn their permanent places in the pack. No pack can hope to continue showing sport year after year without good young ones coming on to replace the old hounds. So what you see is



a product of constant training, breeding and planning for the future.

Now we're past the wheat. The Huntsman's going to try the upper pasture and covers first. The fences are all pretty well overgrown with honeysuckle here, so let's check for wire before climbing them. Ah! Sabine has something by the left-hand fence line. Now an uncertain yelp, and Teasel has joined and three of the young entry—Yeoman, Yarrow and Yvette. The Whip in the field beyond has lifted his cap—it's a view and we're off with a cottontail in full flight.

"Hark to Sabine!" shouts the Huntsman. A scramble through and over the fence, and the Second Whip gives the 'all on' to let him know all hounds are forward. There she goes, streaking for the far corner, with the pack on her heels. What a grand cry they have, and the first-year hounds are right in the thick of it. The first few times out, they were still trailing all over the Huntsman's heels most of the day. They've surely found their noses now! Thank heavens for the gate—starting the day with an uphill run makes the fences twice as high. Ouch! This field's full of briar and sumac, and they haven't slowed a bit. Listen to the cry! Ah, we're through it—there's that loose stone wall. Hold up, hold up. Hounds are working around and on top of it. The Huntsman's going to make both sides good. Gently now, not a sound. Don't want to put up a fresh one



if we can help it. Now they have it. A couple of hounds are speaking to a line ten yards beyond the wall.

"Hark to 'em! Hark to 'em, now!" It looks like a plowed field ahead. Hope they can turn her or they will probably check. There she is—cutting right towards that heavy patch of honeysuckle and briar. She's in! Salsa's right on her scut! What a squeak! Three—now five hounds are digging at the hole. What a row!

"Tallyho!" A Whip has seen her break through the other side. She's too hot to stay to ground. Now we're for it. Arr! This stuff's like wire. They're all on and running in view down the far fence line. Ah, great job, she got back and to ground! Give 'em the horn! What a run. Hold still, there's a thorn in your ear.

Here come the last of the Field, just in time for one more draw before we call it a day. The Huntsman is going to try a thicket and cornfield to the right heading back towards the Meet area. The Field Master asks us to spread out in a line about fifty yards behind hounds to make sure a rabbit doesn't slip away to the side or squat till we're past. All set, let's move out. Damn—that cock pheasant must have alerted the entire countryside.



"Ware wing, Uwchlan! Gerrouavit!" Crack! The old devil should know better. Maybe she knows only too well how good they taste. Now hounds are all forward and trying. Not much here—couple of hen pheasants running left—and there goes a squirrel. Stop that young hound! Good. Who was that young hound? Yeoman? Right. He sure looks promising. Been right up there all day, and worked out that jump from the top of the stone wall like a veteran. Here are some deer tracks. They must have been through just after last Tuesday's rain—hard as a rock now—but we must be careful, don't want to risk the pack running riot on deer. There was a lot of corn left in the field by the machine picker, and they've been feeding here off and on all winter. Look there—Salsa has something—she's not sure yet, yes!

"Tallyho!" cries an overeager Field. There she goes, running a row right down the middle of the corn.

"Hark to Quarry! Hark to her now!" What music! Let's go, let's go! They're really moving! Watch your footing on these stalks. She's turned, now another—she's into the hedgerow. Hold up! The pack has checked fifteen yards into the next field. Let's give them room to work back and recover the line. There's an overgrown fence in there and the rabbit could have sneaked along under it in either direction. The Huntsman's trying right hand first—nothing doing. Now three hounds are speaking to the left of the gap. All are in, pushing in and out of the vines. They've stopped and are giving tongue very eagerly, darting in and out about twenty yards down.

"An earth!" cries a Whip. The Huntsman comes up and makes a swinging cast a bit further on, but they keep coming back to it—yes, she's

to ground. The Huntsman calls in all the hounds and cheers them at the earth, then blows the notes for 'gone to ground' on his horn.



Now the staff moves the pack into the open, and the horn sounds the end of a grand day with hounds.

"Pack up, pack up now!" urge the Whips as they keep hounds clustered round the Huntsman for the walk back to the Meet. The Kalmbachs are giving an old-fashioned Basseters' tea afterwards, and it's usually hearty fare and a good fire. The thought of their home-made biscuits has suddenly given me a whale of an appetite!



We, master and senior hunt staff members, are also always looking for younger people who are interested in working with hounds to join us and develop into whippers-in and huntsmen, as we of what I jokingly call "The Battered Brigade," like aging hounds, need to be replaced by younger legs with the drive to help the pack develop and continue to show sport to our enthusiastic field. Visit our web site, skycastlefrenchhounds.com to read our hunting manual and learn how the staff and pack function. We have training hunts Wednesdays and Saturdays in addition to our formal Sunday meets during the season, and train and exercise hounds Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays through the year. Please contact Jim Scharnberg, master and huntsman, if you'd like to participate at any time.

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