

FOXHUNTING

I Ride Alone

By Barclay Rives

In *Rustler's Rhapsody*, a 1985 satirical western, Jim Carter, who decades later became Carson the butler on *Downton Abbey*, plays the villainous Blackie. Tom Berenger (*Platoon*, *The Big Chill*) is protagonist Rex O'Herlihan, *The Singing Cowboy*. In an early scene, the town drunk, angling for a promotion, tells Rex that he has bought himself a sidekick's outfit. Rex says he has sworn off sidekicks because they keep getting killed. More importantly, Rex points out that his theme song is "I Ride Alone." A singing cowboy cannot change his theme song.

Like Rex, I prefer to ride alone, with a few exceptions. Serving as an honorary whipper-in for forty seasons has allowed me to ride alone. I enjoy taking part in good teamwork with huntsman and fellow whippers-in. I have happily ridden in the midst of congenial hunting fields. However, solitary moments in nature provide most of my hunting pleasure.

I like exploring and learning new territory. Riding through familiar country kindles hunting memories. I recently read an article in which a college professor explains that most people mistakenly perceive memory as a filing cabinet for storing and accessing tidy recollections. The professor says remembering is like reheating leftovers. As flavors and textures change in days old soup or casserole, memories of events change with time and retelling. A favorite friend proclaims it is a shame to let any story die for want of nourishment.

I gladly abandon my solitary ways during junior hunts, when one or more kids accompany me. Sally Lamb, foxhunting godmother to scores of Keswick juniors, usually designates my junior day companions. Many of her kids have been better-mounted and more capable riders than I am. I want to provide them sufficient action. A few years ago, my horse refused a trappy coop in front of a young lady on one of Sally's horses. I cleared it on the second try. The young lady, Jordan Sipe, on the steady reliable Vogue, followed me and exclaimed that it was the first coop she had ever jumped. Pulling her horse up when my horse stopped was also a challenge. Jordan has become a highly skilled rider in the hunting field and show ring; however, I should have chosen a less challenging first hunt jump for her. I now quiz my junior companions at the meet about their riding experience, including: "Do you jump?" My most important obligation is to get the kids safely back to the trailers.

Keswick ex-MFH and fellow author Jake Carle told me a story about the late Melvin Poe, who hunted the Old Dominion, Orange County, and Bath County hounds. Melvin confirmed the story to me years later over dinner in Bath County. Jake and Melvin attended a hunting symposium in which experts discussed how to train a whipper-in. After hours of long-winded explanations from everyone else in the room, someone asked Melvin his opinion. He expressed more wisdom than all previous speakers, and in fewer words: Get a boy raised in the country. If he's got it, he's got it. If he ain't got it, no use [fooling] with him.

I thank Jake for that story as well as for his tolerance of my whipper-in errors when he was Keswick huntsman. I am a slow learner. I attended an MFHA panel discussion on "Duties of a Whipper-in" in New York in January 1978. Panelists included Nancy Hannum of Cheshire and Ben Hardaway of Midland. They stated that a whipper-in should always keep hounds between himself and the huntsman.

Author Mason Houghland in *Gone Away* says that if the position were named "assistant huntsman," members of the field would hear less irritating, needless whip cracking. Assistant huntsman is a better job description. A good whipper-in does whatever is needed by huntsman and masters to make a successful day, including: viewing foxes, preventing a split pack, stopping hounds on riot, bringing on tail hounds, protecting hounds from traffic, repairing damage, all as quietly as possible, except for holloas. I understand the sentiment that huntsman and staff should entertain the field, but their "show" should be less conspicuous than the hounds.

Whether or not I ever, in Melvin Poe's terms, "got it," I am proud that I recognized one woman who got it. Six years ago, Kim Morton was a new Keswick Hunt Club member. Originally from Canada, with the wiry build of a natural equestrian, Kim grew up with ponies and horses. She had worked with race-



Kim Morton, Farmington Hunt Club, Thanksgiving Day, 2015.
Cathy Summers photo

horses, rode a brilliant Thoroughbred/Connemarra mare named Rosie, and was keen and perceptive. One day, when hounds had put a fox to ground in a spot inaccessible to horses, she held my horse as I went on foot with huntsman Tony Gammell to the earth. I told Tony that Kim was sharp and could help us. I correctly predicted she would figure out how to get me my horse before he got his, after we walked out of the covert in a different place from where we had entered.

I invited Kim to ride with me the rest of that day and subsequently. She asked smart questions and knew when to keep quiet. Conversation is a distraction from watching and listening. Kim's aptitude was apparent to others. She also hunted with Farmington Hunt, on the west side of Charlottesville, where she lived and managed a farm. Kim received simultaneous invitations from Farmington and Keswick to serve as honorary whipper-in. She called me and thanked me for my encouragement, but explained that because she lived so close to the Farmington kennels, among other reasons, she would have to accept Farmington's offer and decline Keswick's.

I was able to enlist her as an outrider for the Montpelier Steeplechase Races. Kim had great skill and judgment for that role. She was experienced at ponying fractious Thoroughbreds. She also served as an outrider at the Foxfield Races.

Kim rode with me as a visiting whipper-in at the 2014 Keswick/Farmington/Deep Run Tri Meet, held

at Mt. Sharon in Keswick's Rapidan country north of Orange. The air was damp; the ground was wet. Kim hoped wearing her Barbour raincoat was acceptable. We heard no complaints, especially because we viewed a great running fox. The fox was sneaking out of the first covert in the opposite direction from the way the huntsman was drawing.

Hounds settled on the line and ran for miles. Kim and I went part of the way through woods without trails. We had to step over occasional strands of old wire. As hounds' cry was growing fainter ahead of us, she said, "I should have brought my radio." I replied, "If you had, I would ask you to turn it off." I do not like carrying a radio. I am able to go without one because of the capable fellow staff members who do carry them. Radios save hounds and horses.

I knew the territory, though I had not ridden through there in years. We reached open fields and followed friendly hoof prints. We caught up with the pack before they marked their fox to ground in a covert above Hawfield Grange, at the base of Clarke Mountain. We had entered Bull Run Hunt country, and we were on property owned by Richard Harris, a bold veteran of Bull Run, Keswick, Casanova, and Rappahannock hunting fields. Years before, Richard had noticed a light colored fox dragging a leg trap across his field. He freed the fox, whom he christened Blondie. Blondie delivered good runs from that covert for years. Keswick hounds may have been marking Blondie's great grandson.

We clattered down miles of pavement back into Keswick territory. Hounds found other foxes, who ran more circular routes. Kim and I had good vantage points, and it was a satisfying day.

Kim Morton died unexpectedly in February 2016.

This past February, a fox stirred up my memories of Kim by leading hounds on a similar fast run over the same terrain. Early in the run, Tony Gammell urged Field Master Marilyn Ware to stick to his coattails, because hounds were flying. After galloping to the top of the mist enshrouded mountain pasture, we could barely hear hounds going away below us. The fox began circling and eventually went to ground after the initial straight run. We tried hunting back toward the meet, but foxes kept taking us north. The day was one of the season's best.

My companion that day was Farmington Honorary Whipper-in John Elliott. I have known John for 20 years. He now works at Kim Morton's old farm manager job. He has been Huntsman of the Southern Shires Bloodhounds, and of the Bull Run and Norfolk Hunts. He has the most pleasant disposition of any huntsman I have ever known. His hunting experience and knowledge added weight to his compliments for the pack at the end of the day, when we were muddy, tired and happy. I like to ride alone, but I am delighted to make certain exceptions. 🐾