

Stephanie Guerlain Takes Her Horses from the Show Ring to the Hunt Field

By Martha Drum

Stephanie Guerlain of Farmington Hunt (VA) grew up competing in the equitation ranks, then expanded to jumpers, dressage, and eventing as she lived in different parts of the country with different equestrian opportunities. Ten years ago, after nearly 40 years of riding, she participated in her first foxhunt. Now a regular in the field, she often hunts horses she has started herself one weekend, then takes them showing the next, including Brooklyn, whom she rode to win the 2017 Virginia Horse Shows Association Adult Medal Finals.



Guerlain and Brooklyn competing at HITS Saugerties in 2016. Photo by Sheryl Weitz Hopper.

We asked Guerlain a few questions about being involved in both the showing and hunting worlds.

Q: How did you first get involved with hunting?

A: I grew up in Connecticut, went to my first horse show at age 3, starting with Short Stirrup and working up through the equitation ranks and on the Tufts equestrian team during college. I also started doing jumpers during college. I then switched to dressage during grad school, then evented, and when I moved to Virginia, I eventually switched to hunters as that's what folks at my barn were doing. Finally, 37 years after I started riding, I went to my first foxhunt! That's because the other half of the barn did that. I wanted to try it because it was new, and because I like the ability to ride in new places and see country that you would never get to see otherwise. The interesting side benefit that I didn't expect were the social aspects. I've never belonged to a social club and it was very strange at first, but my husband and I have met so many people through the club.

Q: Some people are surprised to see a show horse in the hunt field, or vice versa. In your experience, how does doing both benefit horse and rider?

A: Foxhunting can be stressful or fun. It depends on the horse. When a horse "gets it" they really like it as well. I do enjoy training them to foxhunt well, it's like anything else, once the horse truly understands everything associated with it, they gain confidence and happiness.

For me, I enjoy the new territories that we ride across, the social aspects, and the food! I love the hunt breakfasts after each hunt. I've also greatly benefitted from the contacts and friends I've made in the community. So, it's not so much about the hunt itself for me, it's about the ride we get to do, and of course am always thrilled when we get to jump cross country or catch sight of a fox or coyote. It's also been interesting riding in the different fields. Hilltopping versus second flight versus first flight can be a completely different experience. I switch fields often depending on the horse I'm on, so I've fully experienced all three flights, as have my horses if they graduate up the ranks.

To me, my horse has "graduated" if he can do all parts of the hunt well, from standing quietly on or tied to the trailer, to riding up front, in the middle, or the back, can stand all day long in hilltoppers or gallop with the first field without pulling, and can handle gates, bridges, ditches, jumps, crossings, tricky or hilly terrain, and of course can handle the hounds, other horses and all the other livestock or wildlife you might encounter, and does all this without getting frazzled by any of it. So, horses can benefit by learning lots of different skills and being exposed to so many things, thus gaining confidence. It can also stress a horse out if over-faced, so the training process is important.



Guerlain, right, and Brooklyn at Farmington's opening meet in 2016, with Elizabeth Uffelman riding another of Guerlain's show and hunt horses, Camden. Photo by Bob Haschart.

Q: What are the biggest misperceptions that show riders have about hunting, and that foxhunters have about the show ring?

A: Frankly, I think most show riders don't even think about foxhunting. One thing I imagine most show riders would be most concerned about is protecting their horse from injury. I must say that in the 10 years I've been foxhunting, and the number of horses I've ridden out foxhunting, I've never had one go

lame or get hurt from it. I am careful, however, to not overdo it. If we've had some big runs in first flight, I will move back to second or third flight.

I also plan how often my horse is doing hard work versus light work throughout the week to judge their fitness level and capability, and I consider the fixture, the footing, and the field masters and who else is in what group when deciding what flight to ride in. I also think our hunt (Farmington) is a very careful hunt, our field masters are conscious of not going where we don't need to go, and not running all over the place unless there's a reason to do so, which I greatly appreciate.

I think another misperception is that a horse cannot or should not do both. I think most horses can handle both, all mine have, including my 3'6" Amateur-Owner hunter, Brooklyn. I don't know how many other A-level show horses are out foxhunting but my guess is it's a very low percentage, primarily due to the injury concerns stated above. Brooklyn took to hunting immediately and is never more relaxed than when she's surrounded by a group of horses. Because she's my top show horse, I only hunt her a few times a month - I don't want her to get too fit.

Perhaps foxhunters think going around and around a ring is boring. Perhaps they don't understand all the nuances involved with achieving the perfect show round, or they do not want to spend the time and effort required to get such perfection. Tons of time, lessons, and practice are required to get to the show ring, so a foxhunter's barrier to entry is probably similar to what mine was for foxhunting: There's not a lot of point of getting into it unless you have the time and resources, and the horse to do it. While I think almost any show horse could foxhunt with the right training, I don't think the reverse is true; a horse that's awkwardly put together or moves badly could be a great foxhunter, but have almost no chance in the show ring.

I am amazed, though, that we do have some show riders who have never really experienced riding outside the ring at all, or even caring for their horses in general. I think that's largely an exception, but some trainers "protect" their riders from so many aspects of horse care and horse management. We do have many former show riders and horses joining the hunt, and I think people eventually might retire from that world and discover foxhunting as a new way for their horses and themselves to carry on the riding tradition.

Editor's note: In addition to the VHSA Adult Medal title, Guerlain has ridden her field hunters to the 2015 SWVHJA Adult Medal Finals win, 2014 VHSA Associate Adult Hunter and Adult Equitation Championships, and second place trips at both Warrenton and Pennsylvania National Hunt Nights.