The rookie whip can learn a few things from the Dali Lama: He's quiet. He's unassuming. He always wears the same uniform and it's in good shape.

In the Right Spot

A rookie whip shares some lessons learned.

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK THOMPSON

FIRST LESSON:
Never refer to oneself as a "whip" — it's should always be the more formal "whipper-in." You see, the emphasis is really on being "in" (as in, "in the right spot") not on the "whip" (as the whip is rarely, if ever used, if you are in the right spot). And, "in" doesn't really mean "in," sometimes it means "out," or "in between" or wherever the huntsman imagined you were supposed to be, but weren't. Not to worry, you'll hear about it, no matter the spot. If you don't learn where to be, and learn it quickly, you may begin to consider your title, at least as heard under your huntsman's breath, is no longer "lady" or "gentleman," nor even "whipper-in," but a curse word instead.

SECOND LESSON:
Whippers-in don't worry about having titles. It's not that they go looking for a bad one; they just don't go looking for a good one either. They just look to go hunting. If they worried about titles, they would never have agreed to undertake a position such as this one, which requires real work.

THIRD LESSON:
Learn to "talk less and ride more." The first time I was given this instruction was while whipping-in during a joint meet with many visiting staff who received the customary invitation to ride up with hounds. The mixed pack of hounds from three different hunts went in three different directions in front of a dozen staff from all of the hunts. The first sub-pack of hounds started to run a jackrabbit to the north. The second sub-pack stayed with the huntsman and wondered what all the babbling was about. The third sub-pack started to give tongue on the tracks of a herd of one hundred antelope that could be seen on the horizon. I was the nearest whipper-in to the front of the pack (the ones starting on the antelope tracks) and I looked back a hundred yards toward the huntsman. He was galloping on with the main part of the pack with him, trying to catch up to the hounds that were nearest me. I continued to look back and could only make out the glimpse of a grimace on the huntsman's face. Arriving at the top of the hill, I pulled my horse up and stopped to see if I was missing unseen quarry in the distance, between us and the antelope. As he caught up to within shouting distance, the shot came: "God damn it, stop them, don't sit there." Yet, in those few seconds of waiting, the front of the pack had already well passed me by, and it was now real work to gallop down the hill and through the treacherous bottom of the ra-

vine to attempt to catch the lead hounds, which were now going nearly as fast as a Thoroughbred horse can go. About a mile later, I succeeded in getting to the front of the pack and stopping the hounds. The huntsman was none too happy about this two-mile stint and looked around to make sure no one was within earshot. "With all of this staff out, you'd think somebody would do something," he muttered before any of the field had caught up to us. He caught his breath and then looked to me, "Why didn't you stop them sooner?" I asked back, "I was waiting for you; why didn't you blow try back?" This relieved the tension made us both laugh as he replied, "'cause these hounds wouldn't have known a try back if they heard one."

FOURTH LESSON:

A good huntsman never criticizes in public. In fact, it is always done out of earshot of anyone else. This is true whether he is speaking to a hound, an honorary whip, a hired hunt professional, and probably his wife, his car mechanic or his worst enemy. I have met more than my fair share of huntsmen now, a term that also obviously includes women, and they are all the same in this regard. I haven't heard one gossip about any person, hound or thing, nor have I heard them utter a public criticism of a staff member.

FIFTH LESSON:

Take your private criticisms as constructive feedback, as if they came from a battlefield general, especially if they come in the heat of battle. If you have ever raised a "'unting dawg" as Surtees liked to call them, you know some are good, some are bad, some are easy and some are hard. The bad and the hard ones worry you the same or more than the good and easy ones. They all become like children and it pains any staff to lose one, even if it's only lost for a minute, and even if it's not your favorite. I have slept under a tree waiting for a hunting dog to return, after losing him during a day afield. Luckily he returned. Every huntsman I know would do the same thing upon losing a hound. So it is much like the "leave no man behind" motto of our Marines — any huntsman feels the same responsibility toward his or her hounds. And, if a general yelled at you because he was worried about his people, you wouldn't take it as anything but a compliment that he was concerned about his troops, which again includes you. Taken in that light, whether on the battlefield or the hunt field, criticisms are really words of wisdom and love meant to keep you from making a stupid mistake and getting your ass shot off. Further, if the huntsman is like a father figure, it's even easier to take any comments as just good advice for surviving to old age, in spite of your rookie mistakes.

SIXTH LESSON:

There are no mistakes, only lessons. I think the Dali Lama said this, and while he isn't a hunting man, he could teach us all everything we need to know about whipping-in. He's quiet. He's unassuming. He always wears the same uniform and it's in good shape. He doesn't have any jewelry. He wears his hair short. He likes being of help to others more than he is concerned with himself. And, he has a good sense of humor and his shoes are always shined.

SEVENTH LESSON:

Invest in stock in a shoe polish company. You'll be going through plenty of it. Along with brass polish for buttons, silver polish for bits and spurs, tack polish for tack, hair polish for manes, etc. You really have no idea of the quantities necessary until you attempt to turn out for 70 days of hunting. I have it on good authority that it's about 25 jars of polish a season. Alternatively, my English pals assure me that you can actually wear out a deer bone, so acquire several at the outset.

EIGHTH LESSON:

You can wear out a hunt coat. An old huntsman saw me trying on a second-hand coat at auction and said, "You should get that scarlet coat, it fits you well." I replied, "I already have one this same weight that I like better." He said, "Yes, but you're young and you'll wear one out every 15 years. You might as well be prepared and it's a good price."

NINTH LESSON:

Be prepared. Be prepared with more horses than you need, a more patient spouse than you think you'll need, an extra pair of gloves, more shoe polish than you'll need for the entire season, a spare bridle, an extra saddle, a spare stirrup leather, a plan for a rainy day, and a space blanket under which to spend the night under a tree waiting for hounds, if that's what it will take to bring all of the hounds home.

TENTH LESSON:

If you don't bring all the hounds home, at least die trying.

Repeat lessons one through ten, until all lessons are learned.

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