

Into Virginia Horse Country

A Tour of

Nirvana

Marc Patoile

*N*o, Virginia, there is no Auntie Mame, she is a distillation and a moonbeam and nothing more," quipped Patrick Dennis. His most famous work, Auntie Mame (1955), spent 112 weeks on the bestseller list, selling over 2,000,000 copies. It's hard to argue with a voice as well-read as his, but Dennis was wrong—Auntie Mame does exist in and around Middleburg, Virginia. And she is still fox hunting.



The elegance of a well turned-out hunter.

Photo by JordanaKeepke.com



The "Best Turned-Out" class lines up for judging.

Photo by JordanaKeepke.com



Participants join in a mock hunt on the 1200-acre Morven Park.

Photo by JordanaKeepke.com

We traveled some 1600 miles to Leesburg, Virginia, to attend the Masters of Foxhounds Association ("MFHA") Centennial Field Hunter Championship Finals ("Finals"). The MFHA was established 100 years ago to set sporting standards, encourage foxhunting, approve and register territories on official maps of foxhunting countries, settle disputes in regard to the same, register eligible foxhounds in a Foxhound Stud Book and improve the breed of foxhounds. This year, the MFHA has been celebrating its 100 year anniversary with national competitions of horses among its 171 organized hunts. Over 400 horses competed in the 16 regions, vying for 64 spots at the Finals in Virginia. In addition, hound performance trials were held and hundreds of hounds came for the concluding ceremonies, which were coupled with the annual Virginia Foxhound Club show.

Upon arriving in the Leesburg/Middleburg/Warrenton area you cannot help but be astounded by the fact that this is hunt country. The local tourist guide promised if "there is a capital of hunt country, Middleburg is it." While that seems a bit boastful, if you seriously consider it, it would be tough to prove this assertion wrong. Aside from the famous show jumping or racing areas such as Ocala and Louisville, this is hunt country central. Stop in most any shop and you'll see flyers for the upcoming hunter shows, hunt cup races, hound show, and hunt fixtures. A few shop keepers were too busy reading hunting books or magazines to pay us much attention other than to welcome us with a friendly, "please let me know if I can help." Even the Middleburg police and water departments have foxes on their logos.

If you live in Middleburg without some involvement with horses, it's like living in Aspen and not taking to the slopes. Even the Middleburg Christmas parade features horses and hounds through the center of town, where legendary foxes have eluded the hunt for generations at this fixture of the Orange County hunt. So, when in Rome, do as the Romans do—hunt from the center of town. Most folks come out just to watch, so it is the cars blocking traffic, not the hunt itself. If you don't love the sport, at least you have to appreciate the spectacle of it all.

Competitors for these Finals came from near and afar—California, Arizona, Colorado, and many other closer locals, of course, including northern Virginia. Especially, if you drove hundreds of miles east, you had to take a moment and consider that Virginia is hunting nirvana. There is no other way around, you are confronted with it—much like the four paneled black fences, stone walls, and beautifully manicured estates, which surround you in these parts. Green grows everywhere. Horses, cattle, and vineyards abound.



The Morven mansion provides a dramatic backdrop to the Centennial Field Hunter Championship Finals.

Photo by Rebecca Patolle



This pint-sized pair clear a fence at Morven Park.

Photo by Rebecca Patolle



Photo by Rebecca Patolle

Hound performance trials were held in conjunction with the annual Virginia Foxhound Club show.

Virginia may not sound much like wine country, so we stopped in at Piedmont Vineyards, home of Virginia's oldest chardonnay. Piedmont Vineyards proudly features the estate's former owner, Elizabeth Furness, riding side saddle on the label of its "Hunt Country Chardonnay." Ms. Furness purchased the estate "Waverly" in 1939, restored the house (the oldest part dating to 1755), and operated a dairy farm here until 1973 when, at the age of 75, she decided to plant a vineyard. She started with five acres each of Chardonnay, Semillon and Seyval Blanc, making Piedmont Vineyards the first in modern times to attempt cultivation of European grape varieties in Virginia. Her first release was a Virginia Chardonnay from the 1978 vintage. The farm is in Orange County Hunt territory, and Ms. Furness was an avid follower of hounds. Today, winemaker is done by John Fitter, who is happy to give tours of coops and grapes. It's hard to get the painting of Ms. Furness aside her horse "Blue Granite" on their label out of my mind.

Competitors for the Finals enjoyed a private Centennial Art Show Artists Reception at the Carriage House at Morven Park. This was followed by the Virginia Foxhound Club Cocktail Party and Annual Horn Blowing Contest, in which Charles Montgomery (Prof. Huntsman, Live Oak, Fla.) took home the blue for his serenade on his hunting horn. On Saturday, there was time for just a quick hack and a few schooling jumps before the Competitor's Reception at the National Sporting Library, featuring the Munning's exhibit. Then, everyone danced the night away at the MFHA Ain't Nothing but a Hounddawg bash at the spectacular Landsdowne Resort.



Photo by Jordan Koepke.com

A huntsman and his horse show fine form over fences.

Photo by Jordan Koepke.com



Eighth place in the Finals went to Debra LaMee and Steeley Dan, representing Colorado's Arapahoe Hunt.

Half of the competitors elected to be early to rise for the optional Best Turned-Out class. All competitors then were divided into two groups, proceeding Under Saddle classes and the mock hunts through some of 1200 acres of Morven Park, a piece of the Loudoun Hunt country. A fitting piece of history, as this estate was owned by Governor Westmoreland Davis who was an avid foxhunter and served as MFH of the Loudoun Hunt in 1906 and was a founder of the MFHA. There were a few short bursts of speed, but the judges were looking for a field hunter with the manners to be worthy of the title—Field Hunter of the Centennial. The top 16 of 60 proceeded to Individual Tests, which can best be described as a 3-3'6" handy hunter course on steroids, complete with a drop rail fence, opening and closing a hand-gate, ponying another horse, and several other jumps.

At the Centennial Closing Ceremonies, Will O'Keefe announced the Finalists in the work off on the lawn in front of the Morven mansion. Over 4000 looked on, many from the adjoining tents, while many others ran back and forth to also catch a glimpse of the Centennial Hound Performance Trials, which was occurring just a few minutes away adjacent to the kennels.

The United States Pony Club presented the colors of Canada, the USA, and (of course) the Blue Ridge Pony Club. Of special note, the Blue Ridge Puppy Show followed the closing ceremonies, which is the place to be in horse country on Memorial Day. Back to the closing ceremonies, the winning hounds were paraded across the lawn with an air of a royal pageant. But stealing the show with both blue ribbons (Best Junior and Grand Champion), was Sputnik, ridden by a junior, Miss Stuart Sanders (Caroline Hunt, VA), on her mother's Russian WB/TB gelding—your Field Hunter of the Centennial. Eighth place went to our own Debbie LaMee from the Arapahoe Hunt in Colorado. Debbie LaMee summed it all up when asked about her experience during the week of the Centennial, "Virginia knows how to do it." 

MFHA Centennial Field Hunter Championship Finals Results

- Best Turned Out: Kathleen O'Keefe, Gol Lee (Casanova Hunt)
- Reserve Best Turned Out: Patti Brantley, Debonair (Live Oak Hounds)
- Best Junior: Stuart Sanders, Sputnik (Caroline Hunt)
- Most Suitable: Morley Thompson, Jr., MFH, Stoney Brook (Camargo Hunt)
- 1st Sanders
- 2nd Rebekah Robinson, Sir Galahad (Radnor)
- 3rd Julie McKee, Leica (Midland Foxhounds)
- 4th Fran Loftus, Eastern Shore (Andrews Bridge)
- 5th Will Coleman, Sherman (Keswick Hunt)
- 6th Tracey Cover, Clementine (Middleburg Hunt)
- 7th Sara McIntosh, Right On Target (Blue Ridge Hunt)
- 8th Debra LaMee, Steeley Dan (Arapahoe Hunt)

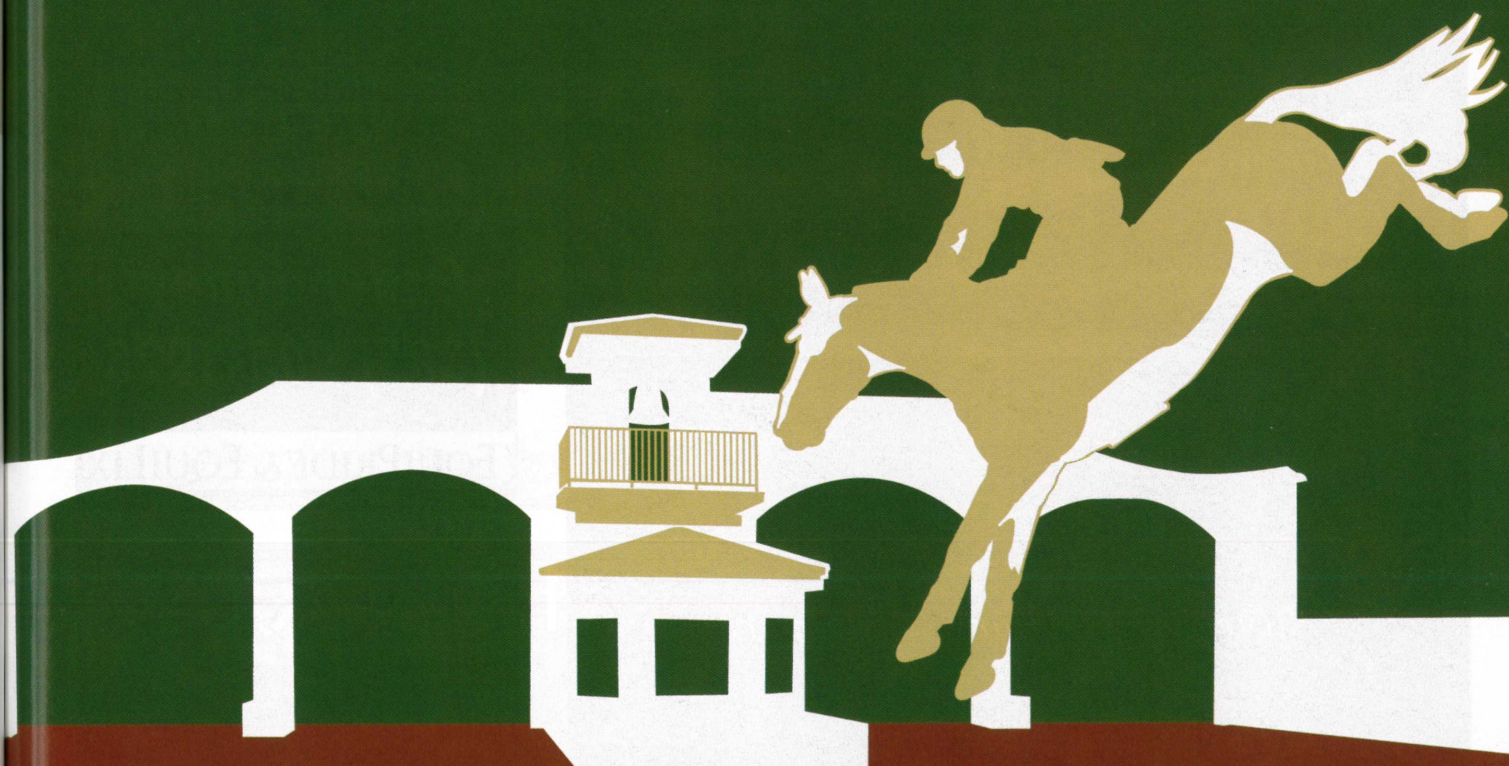


Sputnik, Field Hunter of the Centennial champion.

Photo by JordianKoepe.com

THINKING ABOUT WINTER?

THINK GRAND PRIX



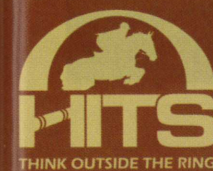
THINK THERMAL

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