



Into the Land of the Horse-Ireland

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Photos by Rebecca Patoile

Foxhunting in Ireland is like the famous quote about war, "long stretches of utter boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror."

The traditions of the horse and foxhunting in Ireland are intricately woven into the Irish landscape. This is especially true in County Galway; home to the Galway Blazers and endless fields of stonewalls that challenge some of the world's finest equestrians. The Irish live up to their reputation of being most hospitable. Upon discovering a visitor they say, "Ye are very welcome here." And they mean it.



Flying fences the old fashioned way often makes the most sense with the County Galway Foxhounds.



David Burke, Jt-MFH and Huntsman, with his Grallagh Harriers.

County Galway drew its remarkable economy from the sea-lanes that made it an important corner of Europe in the 18th Century. It was during this era that families prospered, intermarried, and built many of the castles which still dot the Irish countryside. Perhaps nothing in County Galway today conjures up that romantic period more than the hard-riding members of Ireland's most prestigious foxhunt, the County Galway Foxhounds, also known worldwide as the Galway Blazers.

Here on this western edge of Ireland, on land near enough to the sea for you to still smell a bit of salt in the air, the Galway Blazers hunt the countryside with a pack of hounds. Each October through February, the Blazers fly over the stonewalls which surround the small fields honeycombing the landscape. The hunt is as reckless as it is exhilarating, challenging all the human senses.

Blazer meets, as hunts are known, are held three days a week--Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. The hunt fixture cards, which announce the locations of the meets, hang in all of the pubs in County Galway. On hunt days, the morning mist is often quickly warmed by the Gulf Stream. The Irish speak of the mist blowing off back to the sea and it really seems to happen that way.



Two jockeys going head for head over the final fence at the County Clare Hunt Point to Point Races.

As horses are being unboxed in the mist, the air hangs heavy with the smell of sheep and peat and horses. A winter sun dapples the flat limestone ground and leafless trees cast shadows. This is a landscape rich and textured, still thick with Norman castles and also interspersed with new homes, which seem to be fittingly Irish in design. Some of the locals joke that there are only three designs for Irish houses, no matter what the era. Across the soft green sod, which spreads in stark contrast to the paved roads of which half the day is spent hacking from covert to covert; the riders revel in thundering across the hilly terrain, stonewalls, and gorse hedges. You can often smell the peat burning from the neighbors' fireplaces. Hunting in Ireland literally fills all of the senses and it usually lasts all day long, as well. As the locals say about a hard day with the Blazers, "Ye will be sick with lepping."

Hunting is in the blood of the Irish people. Not having enough three days a week with the Blazers, some of the young folk in County Galway formed the youngest hunt in the county—the Grallagh Harriers, which meets on Sundays to hunt a foot pack of English foxhounds, also for fox. David Burke, MFH, invited us to put on our Wellies and join him for a day trekking across bog and heather. David's father is well known from his show jumping career and provided our hirelings for hunting with the Blazers from his beautiful stables in Loughrea. The Grallagh Harriers kennels are adjacent to the Burke's stables. The hounds were eager to show fine sport at the meet on this misty morning.

Equestrians should also make a point to take in the many races over fences in Ireland, such as those at the County Clare Hunt Point-to-Point Races. These races are used as qualifiers for other national racing competitions. They are races in the open over serious steeplechase fences, complete with professional wagering. After winning my first two Irish bets in a row, it was probably best that I lost the third—as I may have never left Ireland. My selection in the Fourth Race, Senor Christy, Pinney Number 27, had an unlucky fall at the second to last fence on the 3-mile course. The program states that this is a race for "Certified Hunters aged 6 years old, Geldings only, maidens at starting, the property of subscribers to any Hunt in Ireland." I was told that Senor Christy is named after the Irish golf legend Christy O' Connor, Jr. He was up after the fall and entered in a competition a week later.



Mr. J.J. Dempsey, 2nd whipper-in to the Galway Blazers and 82 years young, takes one of many stonewalls in fine form.



Dinny Gould, one of dozens of professional bookmakers at the races, showing 4-1 odds of most horses winning the third race.



Jockeys going hell for leather over the final fence at the County Clare Hunt Point to Point Races.



Mr. Tom Dempsey carries the horn for the Galway Blazers through its picturesque hunt country of stonewalls and hedges.

At the races, we met Pat Kelly who handed me a business card ("Professional Racehorse Trainer.") I later learned he was a famous jockey for ten years and is in the national hall of fame as a trainer. He invited us to his barn for some horse shopping later in the week. The difference in buying a horse in Ireland off the track is that they can jump—they can really jump big—a fact, which Pat's son can testify to, as he was the jockey having the fall on Senor Christy.

Later in the week at his indoor school, Pat gave me a leg up into a racing saddle on a horse that had just been free-schooled at five feet. While I was still busy trying to get comfortable in the sliver of a jock's saddle, Pat put up a pole in the indoor track and we soared over a 2'6" jump. When I wasn't looking again, with my back to him on the straightaway, he put in another bar, making it a 3'6" spread-oxer. Did I mention that racehorses only have one speed—gallop? As I came round again, I saw it was now the 5' high triple-bar, which Pat uses for competition training. I pulled up and decided to break my neck another day. Pat insisted that the horse would take it as smoothly as the other jumps. If I wasn't going to jump it, he insisted we come back for a second day "on the gallops" and to see his other horses scattered all around the county, as he had many to see. In traditional Irish fashion, he bought us fish and chips, drinks, more drinks and refused to take a cent. This wasn't to sell a horse, it's just the way the Irish are, even if it's their last penny.

The second day, I returned to ride Brave Eagle, who is a famous racehorse in Ireland for his competitions over fences. A picture of Brave Eagle hangs in Pat's brother's bar. We walked the horses out to the gallops and they were a bit fresh in the brisk morning air. We got to the track; Pat jumped out of a jeep, and jumped into a tractor to drag the track. Before the tractor was off the track, the jockeys asked, "How're ye?" I said "Fine," and they all took off galloping counter-clockwise around the track. I didn't hear the bell, but it must have gone off in their minds, and in Brave Eagle's, who speed along at a full gallop. I never felt so steady at a gallop, but never felt like I had any reins either. The tractor turned off, just before we passed by. It didn't matter—I just perched



On the gallops with Brave Eagle bringing up the rear.

in my jock saddle and held on. We went 1.75 miles and they pulled up. I caught my breath and thanked God that I had survived as they turned around toward the entrance. They walked past it and said, "How're ye?" I said, "Great, loved it," and before I finished that comment they took off again. I couldn't hold Brave Eagle back as he took off at a steady gallop to close the distance. It was faster than before as he raced to catch the others. If you really pulled on the reins, there was a feeling of collection, but he never broke a stride of the gallop. I wondered how far we would go as I questioned whether I would make it with each coming turn before we came to a stop - another 1.75 miles the opposite direction on the track. Before I could finish muttering I wasn't going to do any more laps, the jocks all walked off the track. Apparently, I had survived. Some the jocks exercise 8-10 horses a day on the gallops. I was happy to have only the one horse.

I read in The Irish Times that Brave Eagle had over 26 starts and made more than \$100,000 in his career, including numerous wins after a vet recommended that Pat put him down. I ran Brave Eagle 3.5 miles on the gallops with three other professionals, including Pat's son, a licensed jockey. Don't talk to me about 3.7 seconds on a bull named Fu Man Chu. Go to Ireland and try foxhunting or racing. Until you survive 6.3 hours in the saddle hunting or 3.5 miles on the gallops on a racehorse—you aren't really living. H



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For a complete listing of
 horse racing in Ireland
 The Turf Club
www.turfclub.ie

*Pat Kelly, Professional
 Racehorse Trainer, with his
 future prospects.*



Connemara ponies abound in Connemara, County Galway, Ireland.