

ADVENTURES AFIELD

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Not the TV show; I'm referring to the job of Huntmaster. There are two types of Huntmaster jobs. I started huntmastering at lure coursing trials a couple of years ago and I think it's a great gig. I get to eye-ball every hound that enters the field, I have an up-close view of every course and I get to make a contribution to the club's efforts in putting on trials. There are job duty specifics (such as timing the tally-ho!) that take some brain-work and if I'm going to be outside all day I'd rather be moving than sitting on my butt. My own hounds get a lot less attention when I am the huntmaster, so I prefer to only do it one day of a trial. All it all, it's a good fit for me.

The other type of huntmaster is at an organized hunt. Other than yelling tally-ho!, huntmastering in lure coursing has nothing in common with the huntmaster in open field coursing and I'm now doing that. Let me tell you, it is the ultimate loser role.

At the beginning of last season I read an article, published some fifteen years ago, saying (I'm paraphrasing) that if there were lots of rabbits the field

got the credit and if there were no rabbits the huntmaster got the blame. Having spent time in the gallery and as huntmaster, I'd wager that's a basic truth.

Open field coursing is about the chase, not the catch. From the rule book: "A get-together of owners, handlers and hounds for the purpose of evaluating performance of the hounds on live game on its own ground." The prey have every possible advantage: a head start, incredible speed, agility and terrain familiarity. We honor most those that get away - and virtually all do.

My first few huntmastering apprentice experiences were full of advice and bemusement. There are no wrong choices, I was told. However, when hares are few and far between, the Gallery certainly second-guesses and stage-whispers their dissatisfaction. Opinions are like noses: everybody has one and they all smell. Some are good, some are bad but I get no takers when offering to hand over the job mid-day.

The huntmaster must have a good memory - what ground has been covered, or not, what was productive, where the rocky areas and arroyos and fences are, where the judge is or should be, where we're going next and oh yes, where the vehicles are, because at some point we're going back there. Some people carry a GPS; I don't - excess weight is to be avoided and frankly,

I prefer the open field to be a technology-free zone.

There are also no right choices. In my humble opinion, it's orchestrating chaos.

The huntmaster is allowed to walk dogs on the line and I have discovered that my neck and shoulder muscles are much more sore now that I huntmaster. I think this is because, in addition to 160+ pounds of dog in my hands and a ruck sack with 20# of water and provisions, I'm constantly scanning - right, left, right, left, repeat - for movement. My head and eyes are in constant motion and my muscles aren't used to it yet. Gallery placement, formation (tight in the trash, looser in open areas) steering a dozen or so people plus dogs to some murky target on the horizon, keeping hunt dogs evenly forward and constantly looking for game.

that can overtake and dominate a course from the outside position. If the rabbit breaks in high cover and is quickly lost; if the rabbit leads your dog on a merry chase across bad terrain and your dog is injured; if you walk for hours and hours and never see a jack; if it is a short course and your dog doesn't have the opportunity to demonstrate endurance, the score will reflect that... and you are unlucky. But if the rabbit breaks into the clear and your dog is sighted and the lay of the land is such that you can see most of the course and it's a good rabbit and makes honest hounds work hard and then gets away and your hound comes back sound, you are very lucky indeed. Bad luck is easy to come by, good luck much harder.

Of course, a good day in the field requires much more than luck; good planning and common sense are absolute necessities.

Bring out an unconditioned or untrained dog, come without proper supplies and knowledge, fail to be prepared for bad luck and you're not just unlucky—you're setting your hound up for disaster. If luck favors the well-prepared, we are all able to stack the deck in our favor.

One frustration, for me, is the lack of data on jackrabbit behavior.

Considered a pest species, there's not a lot of empirical information available on where to find them, how they behave at different times of day or based on temperature, wind speed, season. There's plenty of anecdotal information, some of which is probably accurate but lots of just plain baseless opinion too. I am left to wonder if jacks would be easier to find if we understood them better.

A good huntmaster must have a good memory, thick skin and a very loud voice—an indispensable talent when the gallery is screaming RABBIT!!!!!!!!!!!!!! and hounds are exploding in frustration at the end of taut leashes.

Want the job? It's yours; I'll walk over here with my hounds and keep my eyes peeled. Don't want it? Can't blame you, it's a no-win job but a bad day in the desert with hounds beats the socks off a good day doing almost anything else. §

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When something moves I have a split second to find and identify it - bird? gopher? cottontail? jackrabbit? If a jack, I next look at the hunt dogs, are they sighted? If no, I have fraction of a split second to decide if the dogs can *get* sighted. Simultaneously I consider if it is *safe* to slip the dogs, because their safety is the primary concern of the Huntmaster at all times. I may yell RABBIT LEFT then TALLYHO!! and watch for pre-slips. As the hounds in my hands transform into hysterical hairy helicopters and I hang on for dear life while desperately trying to maintain my footing, I scan the gallery to ensure there are no loose dogs, confirm the judge is doing his job, order everyone to take three steps back, or get down or shut up or all of the above and whatever else is necessary... Be wrong and the hunt dogs are slipped on the wrong species. Be late and they lose the jack in the cover. Be downwind and the far handler that's hard of hearing (or running off at the mouth) misses the tallyho.

Be anything short of pretty perfect and you're a heel. Get it all right and you're just flat lucky.

Luck plays a spectacular role in hunting. For example, if your dog is in blue (hence on the right) and the rabbit breaks out on the left and goes left, you are unlucky. It is a rare hound