

### ***Riding to the hounds in southern California.***

*by Julie Beer*

Yes! The red coats, the hounds, Tally Ho! and all that. The real deal. Interested? Read on!

The Santa Fe Hunt, established in 1969 in Rancho Santa Fe, is alive and thriving in Temecula Horse Country. Foxhunting, also known as “Riding to the Hounds,” is the foundation of today’s hunter/jumper discipline. To be clear, coyote, not fox, are dominant in this part of the country. Because coyote are both very clever and fast, it’s extremely rare for the hounds to actually catch one; thus Santa Fe Hunt considers itself a “chase,” which is also the philosophy of the Masters of Foxhounds Association that rules all recognized hunts in the US.



At the invitation of the landowners, riding locations (aka “fixtures”) are large cattle ranches that welcome foxhunters because coyotes kill the newborn calves. Chasing them off the ranch benefits both landowners and their herds. Santa Fe country is primarily in the beautiful Garner Valley and Anza areas, with occasional trips to the Tejon Ranch, and joint meets with other western hunts. The amazing places that Santa Fe rides is a powerful draw to the sport.

What exactly happens when you ride with the Santa Fe Hunt? You get a very early start and dress in the proper “show” attire – boots, light color britches and a dark coat. Why so early? Because Santa Fe hounds are scent hounds, and scent is strongest in the early morning, making for the best sport. After the necessary cup of coffee, load the trailer and you’re off to the hunt fixture. Most members own a rig or have made regular arrangements with a friend or professional who can get their horse to the meet.

Upon arrival, the routine is generally to greet friends, groom and tack up your horse, finalize your riding gear, and mount up. Helmets are mandatory and spurs, crop, and gloves are the

norm. Often, there is time and a place to warm up your horse. Children and Pony Clubbers are particularly welcome and looked after. Western riders are always invited and the only requirement is a helmet.

The main players of the hunt include the Huntsman, who leads and directs the hounds; the Master, who provides field leadership; and the Whippers-In, members or professionals who ride the four points of the pack (two up front, two on drag) to keep hounds together. Sometimes, as in the case of the Santa Fe Hunt, the Master is also the Huntsman.

After mounting, everyone gathers to hear the Master's welcome to guests, description of the day's activities, and field leader assignments. Now it's time to decide which field (group of riders) suits your experience and skill. Santa Fe sports three or four fields, depending on the needs of the members on any given day.

### **The "Fields"**

First Field is the jumping field and is the fastest – mostly cantering, galloping and trotting at a brisk pace. This field is for experienced members and new riders who are comfortable jumping at least 3'. Second Field moves at a good clip but there is no jumping, instead opening and closing gates to negotiate the fence lines. It's a good choice for a new but strong rider with a solid mount. Third Field moves at a pace that is comfortable for the group. Mostly trotting and walking, third field is a great place for riders and/or horses new to the sport, young or novice riders, and offers a respite for tired horses.

When hounds exit their "hound truck," it seems like initial pandemonium – hounds underfoot, running every which way until the Whips gather them into a cohesive pack, and they're off! Normally, after a bit of trotting, the Huntsman will "cast" (direct) them into a covert of vegetation where scent could be strong and the search begins! Tails are up, noses on the ground, this is serious work for these hounds that love their job. When hounds pick up a scent line, they let out a beautiful cry (howl), the Huntsman blows his horn in encouragement, and when the scent is fresh, coyote is often sighted.

The chase is on! Tally Ho!

# September 2017 - The Chase Is On!

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Thursday, 31 August 2017 22:25

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