

# The Fox Went to Ground, But I Didn't

By Steven D. Price

**Y**ou've got to come hunting," said Norman Fine, my friend and host. The invitation was much appreciated, but not without a few sober second thoughts. I hunted twice in my life, but that was three decades ago. This was now: My body is 30-plus years older and, no thanks to sciatica,

not exactly hunting fit. Accordingly, my current equestrian adventures focus on courses of speed-bump-sized jumps augmented by trail rides on unflappable horses.

On the plus side, Norm, as a lifelong foxhunter and editor of *Coverside*, the Masters of Foxhounds Association magazine, would be the perfect guide (read: babysitter). And I would ride his "guest horse,"

a 17-year-old Thoroughbred appropriately named Guitar, with whom I get along famously, perhaps because bluegrass music is my other raging passion. Norm and I agreed that we wouldn't ride in the first flight, the group where all the galloping and jumping takes place. Instead, we would "hilltop," or watch hounds work from elevated vantage points.

And so on one Saturday morning last November, properly turned out in boots, breeches, one of Norm's black coats and a stock tie knotted to the tension of a blood-pressure cuff, I climbed aboard Guitar to join the meet.

Soon, men in scarlet or black coats, women in black coats and children in tweed coats and jodhpurs set off down the road, led by some two dozen hounds and the hunt staff. Two hundred hooves on pavement rattled like a hailstorm on a tin roof. I rejoiced to be part of the pageant and remembered to breathe.

"Do you see the fox?" Norm asked, pointing to a blur streaking away as the hunt entered a meadow. I did see, and so did everyone. Encouraged by the huntsman's horn, the hounds took off, as did the horses. Talk about "hunting fit"—Guitar's upward transition

was, to put it mildly, far more emphatic than anything I'd seen during the ASPCA Maclay National Championship flat phase two weekends earlier.

Guitar was clearly a Stratocaster, not about to spend the next several hours nose-to-tail behind Norm's horse. In response, Norm led me at a canter to a group of some two dozen adults and children trotting a football field's length behind the first flight.

Soon it was apparent that the fox had gone to ground, because hounds could be seen heading in a different direction. Off we went at a good pace, Guitar's long, powerful Thoroughbred trot easily keeping up with cantering horses.

Through a gap into another field, down a slope (upper body behind the motion), up a steep hill (heels way down, pinch of mane) and halt at its crest (resume breathing). Perhaps a quarter mile away and far below us, hounds scampered into a wood. Huntsman and whippers-in, then the first flight followed over a triangular coop set in the fence line. Some riders cantered up to the coop, and some chipped. Others trotted to its base with varying degrees of impulsion. One way or another, all got to the other side. Hunter seat equitation, be hanged.

Again hounds reversed their field, and we moved off, this time down a very steep hillside. At the bottom was a wide ditch, across which was an equally long and steep uphill stretch. Guitar picked his way down, but as we reached the bottom, he began to canter. That we would jump across the ditch was a foregone conclusion. The question was how high up the hill we'd land. I bridged my reins, grabbed another pinch of mane and soared across. "You want to go?" I heard myself asking Guitar. "Then go," doing nothing to check his headlong uphill gallop.

Once at the top of the hill, we proceeded single file through the woods at a walk until we reached the road a quarter mile from where we started. Some people announced they'd call it a day. Norm looked at me. I nodded. Mission accomplished: back the same day on the same horse.

But my day was not yet over. An hour later I was at a hunt breakfast, a plate of food in one hand and glass of whiskey in the other. At least when it came to getting to the buffet table, I was up there in the first flight. 🐾



Steven Price and Guitar (foreground, left) and their foxhunting guide, Norman Fine (foreground, right).

Another reason I wanted to go hunting: I could pursue my lifelong quest for equestrian activities where wrong leads and diagonals are not penalized.