The scent of man

Since the fox-hunting ban in England and Wales, the sport has turned to human quarry. By Dominic Bliss

It's a chilly Saturday in the village of Out Rawcliffe, just a few miles east of Blackpool, north-west England. At Peagram's Farm, 35 excited riders – the huntsmen in smart red jackets, the rest in black or tweed – are waiting for the hunt to start. They sip port and sherry to brace themselves against the wind coming in off the Irish Sea, while their finely groomed horses jig their heads and stamp their hooves.

Below them, whining and barking in anticipation, is a pack of about two dozen bloodhounds. Mingling with the dogs, and looking decidedly apprehensive, are two "foxes" – Richard Davies, a 49-year-old civil servant from Kirkham, and Matthew Ray, a 32-year-old (off duty) journalist from Brighton. Both are accomplished athletes.

As they pet the hounds, allowing the animals to memorise their scent, the master huntsman Clive Richardson offers a few words of encouragement. "Don't worry," he says. "When a limb's torn from you, it really doesn't bleed that much."

Traditional fox-hunting has been forced to adapt radically in the face of the 2004 hunting ban in England and Wales. Some have chosen to practise drag-hunting. Others, like the Vale of Lune Hunt in Lancashire, based at Out Rawcliffe, have persuaded amateur club runners such as Davies and Ray to be the quarry.

The "manhunt" takes place on a prearranged route across farmland, through woods, over fences and hedgerows. It is split into five separate sections, each about a mile and a half long, which guarantees that weaker or younger riders do not get left behind. Only the runners and master huntsmen are privy to the route.

Given the nod from Clive, the two runners sprint off with a five-minute head start. Suddenly, in a flurry of wagging tails, lolling tongues and urgent barking, the hounds are released. They instantly latch on to the runners' scent. Just a few molecules dropping from human skin give the canine noses enough to go on.

What follows looks chaotic, but is actually tightly organised. The two runners steeplechase their way across fields, leaping hedgerows, through muddy ditches and into patches of woodland. The sleepy English countryside is rattled by the sound of hunting horns, yelling riders, clattering hooves and barking hounds. The hounds stop every few hundred yards to sniff out the trail. Occasionally, when the runners make a sharp turn, they overshoot a corner so that the master huntsman's assistants, the "whippers-in", have to put them back on track with a crack of their whips.

While the runners can quickly vault the obstacles in their path, the riders often have to queue up to jump from one field into another. This is a set course, and unlike traditional fox-hunting, participants must stick to their designated route. It inevitably gives the hunt an element of artificiality. "It's not fox-hunting," says Davies after he has finished running the five sections, totalling just under eight miles. "It's not for the purist. But when you hear the hounds baying after you, it makes the adrenaline kick in, makes you run that little bit harder."

Pursuit Human quarry Matthew Ray on the run from the hunt and, below, with fellow runner Richard Davies and a hound Michael Carroll

Thanks to the head start on each section, both Davies and Ray stay ahead of their pursuers all day. The closest they get to being savaged (or "licked to death", as the master huntsman puts it) is on the final leg, when the gap closes to a couple of minutes.

Master huntsman Richardson then blows a salute on his horn, signalling the end of the hunt. Everyone applauds the runners before heading back to the farm for refreshments. Foxes never got treated with this respect.

Richardson explains that hunters have adapted to ensure their sport's survival. "It's keeping our culture alive. We love our horses, we love our hounds, we love riding across the countryside and being outside. So we've learnt to evolve our sport."

Hunting human rather than vulpine quarry can be traced as far back as the 1960s. But since the 2004 ban it has grown in popularity. Richardson, a 57-year-old professional huntsman, first bred his hounds (a cross of bloodhound and Dumfriesshire foxhound which is ideal for pursuing humans) five years ago when he realised the ban was inevitable. He has led about 100 hunts since, in pursuit of various runners, including his own sons.

Richardson hopes the hunting ban will eventually be overturned so he can return to the raw version of his sport. "Hunting runners is much more sanitised," he explains. "It's predictable. You know roughly where you're going to go and what you're going to have to jump. We yearn for the days when we could ride anywhere the hounds went."

He concedes that the riders still enjoy the thrill of the chase: "Most of the people that come out with us are indifferent to whether any animal is caught. They just want to fly over hedges and experience the adrenaline. There's a good atmosphere, and it's within the law. It's fun watching those great big snappers chase the runners." And crucially, no one gets torn to pieces at the end.

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