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STEEPLECHASING



PHOTO BY ANITA BAARNS

The water jump at Great Meadow

"I love the visuals of steeplechasing: the immaculately groomed horses, the silks of the jockeys, the flags marking the fences, the white rails that line the homestretch, the colorful party tents, and, above all, the beauty of the landscape at the country race meets..."

—Peter Winants, author of *Steeplechasing: A Complete History of the Sport in North America*, and former amateur race rider

"The best feeling I have ever had is riding in a race. They [horses] give you everything they have. It's amazing that something so big will do that for you. You feel so privileged – and honored."

—Jonathan Thomas, 20-year-old steeplechase jockey

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Steeplechasing's origins are uncertain, but the best guess is that the first race, from one church steeple to another, took place in County Cork, Ireland in about 1752, to settle a dispute over the merits of two horses, take your pick as to the route to follow. Racing over jumps in open country soon caught on in the British Isles – a logical extension of foxhunting.

In 1834 the sport crossed the Atlantic, with the first race in Rock Creek Park in Washington. For those interested in its subsequent history Peter Winants' book cited on the previous page is a must. Today steeplechasing is well ensconced from Saratoga to Atlanta, with outpost meets elsewhere.

As the quotes on the prior page suggest, the ingredients of steeplechasing – beauty, emotion, the connection between horse and rider, risk and courage – make the sport addictive for its participants and followers. If a quiet trail ride on horseback is the equivalent of a Sunday drive through the countryside, then steeplechasing is the equine parallel to a NASCAR race, happily free from the noise, fumes, hype and commercialism of that activity.



PHOTO BY PAT MACVEAGH

Jumping a timber fence together



Virginia is by far the nation's leader in number of steeplechase race meets, holding more than twice as many each year as the next state. Not surprisingly, the Virginia hunt country is the scene of almost all of the action, and its hunt people the biggest participants, sponsors and enthusiasts.

Most flat races for Thoroughbreds are now at distances from five furlongs to a mile and a half, run most often in America on an oval track with a dirt surface. Steeplechase races are two to four miles, run on grass. Thus the best flat racers may not have the staying power or prefer the racing surface called for in 'chasing. Selecting steeplechase prospects, and teaching them to jump, are skills that define the best steeplechase trainers. Often these horses are flat track graduates, though not always the fastest, maturity, staying power, and athletic ability being more critical than blinding speed.

About 25 race meets are held in Virginia each year, each meet consisting of six to eight individual races. Meets are divided into two categories:

- **Point-to-Points** are essentially amateur events, usually put on by a local hunt. Prizes are small engraved mementos of nominal monetary value, though larger "permanent" bowls or cups are often the keep-it-for-a-year award for winning a featured race, some trophies going back to the beginnings of the race meet.



Horses jumping a National Fence

PHOTO BY PAT MCVEAGH

Programs include a selection of races – over jumps and on the flat – some including a Foxhunter's Timber Series race limited to horses that have seen substantial service as field hunters in the past season.

Often a "hunter pace" is held in connection with a Point-to-Point. Here teams of two foxhunters each compete over perhaps three miles of hunt country, going as fast as they can (fast time) or to match a typical hunting pace (optimum time) established but undisclosed prior to the event.

- **Sanctioned Races** are run under the rules of the National Steeplechase Association, and involve purses of from \$5,000 to, in a few instances, six figures. Since there is, with one or two exceptions, no pari-mutuel betting on steeplechase races in Virginia, the purses come from commercial sponsors as a means of promoting their products.

Within a meet the "card" (program) consists of hurdle races over brush or artificial brush* jumps, typically two to two and a half miles, and "timber" races over higher, more solid obstacles, going three to four miles. Within the category each race specifies the conditions entrants must meet to qualify, such as: maidens (horses that have never won a race of this type), non-winners of two, claiming

price (if any) for which the entered horse may be bought, etc.

Additional conditions may vary the weight each horse is to carry – for example a novice jockey may be given an allowance of a few pounds off the standard to take account of inexperience, or a horse that is a multiple winner may have weight added. The purpose is to establish a field of horses for each race that have a relatively equal chance of winning it.

* **Artificial brush hurdles**, consisting of a padded steel frame topped by simulated brush made of plastic, are called **National Fences**, and can be moved from one meet to the next and positioned as needed, saving much investment in permanent fences and labor cutting cedar trees, as well as adding flexibility to course design.

National Fences were developed in Ireland by Earl Harrington. Randy Rouse tells how they came to America: "I was hunting in Ireland and saw these fences. I said to Bill Harrington 'That solves our problem,' so I had two of them flown over here and tried them at the Fairfax meet. The Jockeys didn't want to jump them, but we made a deal. If they didn't work we'd draw lots for the purse money. They agreed and we ran the races over them with no problem." Randy, a long time race rider over fences, does not mention whether he won that day or not. National Fences are now the standard hurdles at all but a few U.S. steeplechase meets.

More recently the National Steeplechase Association has been testing plastic come-apart wings for jumps to lessen the hazard (compared to permanent wooden wings) if a horse decides to or is pushed into running through the wing of a jump.





PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

Lady Rider Timber Race at Oatlands, 2003 – Forever Silver (Beth Newman) leading Bavario (Tiffany Mueller), and Double Redouble (Julie Bonnie)



Tailgate on the rail...



and headed for the start at Glenwood Park, Middleburg



The Greyling leading Hendler at Glenwood Park

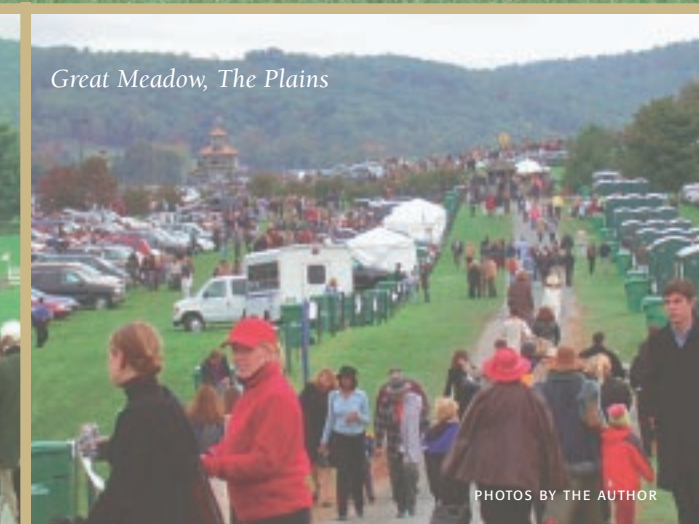
In Virginia there are about 17 different race sites. Almost all are in beautiful, rolling country, with a backdrop of pastoral or mountain views. Careful location of jumps and finish line assures spectators of an easy view of most of the action. Races are held, rain or shine, from the last weekend in February through the middle of May, and again, in the fall from mid-September into November, capitalizing on the best weather for both spectators and horses.

Because of this variety of season and site each race meet assumes a character of its own. For us Casanova, coming in late February, is the beginning of spring, weather or not. Blue Ridge, two weeks later, may have traces of winter still showing, but we treasure past wins there. Perhaps our favorite, though, is the Old Dominion Hunt's Point-to-Point at Ben Venue near Amissville. Set in a bowl of fields, surrounded by woods with a spectacular backdrop of mountains, it is the perfect setting in which to enjoy Virginia's early April sunshine.

Attendance at races varies from a thousand or two at Point-to-Points to up to 50,000 at the Virginia Gold Cup in May. Steeplechase meets in Virginia and surrounding states are social highlights of almost every spring and fall weekend, drawing spectators and horses from all over the Mid-Atlantic states.



Fall Gold Cup views at...



Great Meadow, The Plains

PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR