

[EQUINE JOURNAL AFFILIATE]

Norfolk Hunt Club

Provides Tips on Preparing for Hunt Season

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SATURDAY, OCTOBER 4, MARKS THE Opening Meet for the Norfolk Hunt Club's formal foxhunting season. Riders participating in the fixture have spent time and effort getting ready for the occasion. Horses must be immaculately turned out—braiding of manes is a longstanding tradition of this hunt—and riders will transition from informal to formal attire for the opening meet and remainder of the season. Tweeds are packed away and classic black hunt coats with white stock ties are the order of the day.

The work involved in this traditional event actually started months ago. The key to a safe and successful hunt season is a well-conditioned, fit horse; tack should also be in good, safe riding condition. To that end, Norfolk's Masters of Foxhounds—Ruth Lawler, MFH, Tom Lewis, MFH and Owen Hughes, MFH—asked Norfolk's Huntsman, Heather Player, to share with the membership her plan for getting a field hunter fit and ready for hunt season. Following is an excerpt from Heather on the subject.

Heather's Fitness Schedule

According to Heather, "This is the schedule I've worked out over the years; obviously every horse is different, so I may make a few changes as I go.

■ **Week one:** 20/30 minute walk (week = six days and one day off).

■ **Week two:** 20 minute walk, 10 minutes of trotting.

■ **Week three:** 30 minute walk, 20 minutes of trotting.

■ **Week four:** 30 minute walk, 20/30 minutes of trotting. I'll start to do a bit more hill work when trotting.

■ **Week five:** Same as week four but more hill work and a bit of cantering; usually a 10/15-minute walk back to the barn.

■ **Week six:** Same as week five but adding in a couple of jumps.

■ **Week seven:** Same as week six, but with a longer canter set and maybe a good blast up a hill or two.

■ **Week eight:** Everyone should be where I want them at this point so I can jump a few more fences if they need a tune up.

I have the benefit of the walking machine so that will help me in moving them along in the early stages. I prefer Thoroughbreds—they tend to get fit pretty quickly—but I'm always mindful of how their legs are holding up. That's why I think it's so important to do a lot of walking to build them up. I try and keep them turned out as much as possible (if the bugs and heat allow) so they can be moving while they graze. I tend not to wrap unless it's necessary and having them out helps a lot with reducing any stocking up.

During the Hunt Season we all get Sundays off! For the rest of the week, this is what we do.

■ **Monday:** I put them on the walking machine for 20 minutes (a good substitute for the walker would be a light hack or long walk) then go jog them for about 15/20 and maybe a good, long canter around a field or two if they need it.

■ **Tuesday:** Before hunting, they may walk on the machine for 15/20 minutes while I sort out hounds (Riders can arrive at the fixture with enough time to walk and trot so horses' muscles warm up).

■ **Wednesday:** A long walk, 30/40 minutes for those that hunted the day before.

■ **Thursday:** Everyone on the machine for 30 minutes (substitute a long walk or light hack), then I would jog out who isn't going on hound schooling.

■ **Friday:** Same as Mondays.

■ **Saturday:** Same as Tuesday (time permitting).

At the end of the season I think it's a good idea to keep them walking for about a week before letting them completely down. Then they have the winter completely off. For the past seven years I've sent mine down to Virginia to be turned out. They get a chance to be horses and have their down time. I'm still up in the air about whether I'll do it this year, but I've had good success with sending them south. They come off the trailer in the spring relaxed and they know it's time to get back to work. I spend a couple of days cleaning them up and then start all over again."

Safe Tack is Critical to Success

As anyone who has experienced the terror, embarrassment, and danger of having tack break in the hunt field knows, tack must be in excellent condition for foxhunting, and checked regularly throughout the season. Norfolk member and trainer Sarah Morton advises to carefully look at the stitching on every piece of tack a rider will use when foxhunting—bridles, breast plates, girths, stirrup leathers, reins, saddles and more—and allow enough time to get anything even remotely questionable fixed in time for the season.

"If a stitch feels loose, be sure to get it restitched. If a stirrup leather is worn, particularly in the high stress area where the stirrup sits, be sure to replace it. And be careful about certain oils used for conditioning, as they can weaken or even eat through stitching." The repetitive stress on tack from hunting every week can occur any time during the season, so Sarah advises being especially diligent about tack safety. "When you are out in the country and a piece of tack breaks, it is a long way back to the barn." She recommends examining tack carefully each time it is cleaned after a hunt, and having plenty of spare parts to avoid last minute rushing about.

Norfolk and New England Hunter Trials

The Norfolk Hunter Trials are scheduled for Sunday, October 19, at the Norfolk Hunt Kennels in Dover, MA. The event is a favorite of the equestrian community as it offers an opportunity for foxhunters and other riders to navigate a course filled with obstacles encountered in hunt country. Further information on the Norfolk Hunter Trials may be found at norfolkhunt.com. To volunteer, contact Norfolk member and Hunter Trials chair Dominic Cammarata at dominic.cammarata@genzyme.com.

The following Sunday, October 26, The Wentworth Hunt will host the New England Hunter Trials at the Norfolk Hunt Steeplechase Course in Medfield, MA. For information on the New England Hunter Trials, visit wentworth-hunt.org or contact Marilyn Mariano at secretary@wentworthhunt.org or 603-505-2457. ■