

The thrill of the chase

Team chasing has been described as the ultimate equestrian extreme sport. Teams of three or four jump cross country fences against the clock, and have to get three riders home to be in with a chance. A stop or an unseated rider does not mean it is all over, but can cost vital seconds.

Obstacles include stout hedges, stone walls, solid timber and large drops, taken at seemingly impossible angles, as it's not usually the team with the fastest horses that wins, but the one that can ride the shortest and tightest track.

It's also highly sociable, with even the leading squads cheering each other on and joining in the post-competition celebrations.

It was very much in this spirit that team chasing was born, when the Master of Hickstead, the late Douglas Bunn, invented the sport in 1974. He had been invited to lunch by Alan Mouncer who was then a top ranking sports producer at the BBC. The purpose of the invitation was to see if Duggie could come up with any new ideas for Hickstead.

After the third or fourth glass of port Duggie suggested a team chase of five riders (four to count) over the natural formidable fences on the Hickstead Estate. The conditions for the chase were written on the back of the menu.

Twenty teams were invited to compete. Each equestrian discipline had its own team and the one and a half-mile course consisted of about 30 fences. The second was a 10ft drop hedge closely followed by two 5ft solid rails into and out of the railway. So it continued mercilessly to the last three gigantic downhill fences which had to be taken at full speed to be in with any sort of a chance.

The Team Chase was televised live on Good Friday and continued as an annual event until the Hickstead Easter meeting was replaced by a Whitsun meeting some eight years later.

It has evolved somewhat since then; teams are now three or four riders and as well as the prestigious open classes, sponsored this season by the Goring Hotel and Material Change, there are intermediate and novice classes for those progressing through the ranks or simply wanting to try something different. At novice level, the team closest to a preset 'bogey' time wins, with a steadier pace suiting less experienced combinations.

Trouble is, it is easy to get hooked, and with 18 events throughout the season, which takes place in the autumn and spring, team chasing can soon take over your life! Fixtures take place around the country, although sadly some of the Yorkshire events are not running at present due to the financial climate and farming policy.

It's an ideal sport for horses which have had an active career in other disciplines and whose riders are looking to have some fun with their mounts. Retrained racehorses have done especially well in team chasing, while some well known former event horses can also be spotted flying the fences.

And because the three or four horses run together, it's ideal for galvanising lazy horses or those needing confidence. Some very young riders on small ponies can be seen whizzing

round the novice courses, and mounts which can be a little nappy or prone to a stop in hunter trials generally jump very well in a team chase.

Charlotte Alexander, a member of leading open team ROR Lycetts A Class Act says: I started many years ago on my hunter and I went from there until I got (Foxhunter chase winner) Earthmover, who scared me rigid the first few years until I sorted out his brakes!"

"Where else can you jump decent hedges at speed and one after another? You can do well on any horse - the faster ones can fluff their turns whereas the slower mounts can cut corners easier. It is a great sport for schooling the young horse at novice level which is just as exciting as having the 20 year old champion flying round the Open so effortlessly."

Events are generally run by hunts, with the courses based on and reflecting their natural country, augmented with a few 'island' fences built to test accuracy and minimise the temptation to go too flat out!

So, at the Cotswold and VWH team chases, expect stone walls, while the Atherstone is famous for its huge, solid hedges, which terrify riders but encourage fluent, bold jumping from the horses. Water and ditches also feature regularly, the former attracting crowds of spectators hoping to witness a ducking, so it is worth practicing these first.

Horses (and riders) do need to be relatively fit, although the demands of the course again vary with the hunting country. The Bicester event is on flat ground, whereas the Pytchley is renowned for a steep hill which tests teams' resources in the closing stages.

The open classes are qualifiers for the Material Change national championships which will run on 7th April 2013 at Little Compton in Oxfordshire.

A recent innovation, which recognises the amazing distances that competitors are prepared to travel for their 'fix' is the National Team Chase League, sponsored by Coombe Farm Wines. In open and intermediate classes, teams are awarded points for finishing in 1st-5th place, with the series climaxing at the Cotswold event each October with a prize fund of £2400 up for grabs.

Coombe Farm Wines is the family business of the Vesteys, also the Cotswold event hosts, who freely admit their passion for the sport.

Mark Vestey says: "We are delighted to support the National Team Chase League. This is an exciting and unique sport, which is much enjoyed by our family – what could be nicer than sponsoring something that has given us all so much pleasure."

Mark's wife Rosie, son and daughter in law Ben and Chloe and daughter Tamara Fox all competed at the 2011 Cotswold event, proving that it really is a family affair!

Sarah Myhill of the Art Hotel Chasers, 2011 national champions comments: "We all want to win the league, it makes us even more competitive! It is brilliant news that Coombe Farm Wines have agreed to sponsor it this year. This will encourage others to take up team chasing – a sport which, because of the speed and the size of the fences, promotes high standards of riding."

One team which regularly makes long journeys to events is the Point Two Top Spec Hair Raisers, whose members hail from Cheshire and West Wales. Mark Cramb explains:

“At my first event, I was scared to death but loved it when I crossed the finish line! We bought my best horse Hugo to sell on and soon realised that he was too strong to hunt. But we tried team chasing and he took to it like a duck like water. Without team chasing, he would not have any use other than as a hack and that would be such a waste of a talented horse.”

Mark Cramb comments on the unique spirit of team chasing. “I love it, the atmosphere is amazing and I must say how friendly all other competitors are, always willing to help although they are in competition with us.”

“We need to introduce more and more people to the sport and to try the opens. If you are worried, do as I do just close your eyes till you land on the other side of the fence!”