The team chasing season reaches its climax next month with the national championships – a great opportunity to get hooked on this exciting sport. We take a look at what's in store and meet two up and coming teams.

The Goring Hotel and Material Change National Team Chase Championships takes place on All Fools Day – April 1st. But when the huntsman blows his horn to set each team off, there's no time for fooling around. The aim is to jump the 30 fences and get at least three of the team members over the finish line as quickly as possible.

Teams have qualified for the final, organised by the Fernie hunt at Tur Langton, Leicestershire at events across the country from Derbyshire to Somerset and Essex. Each course reflects the natural character of the host's hunting country from blackthorn hedges to stone walls or deep ditches and upright post and rails, but success always depends on the ability to jump at speed and gallop over varying terrain.

The Fernie has its own 'high Leicestershire' features including huge drops and a stout hedge line where competitors must snake backwards and forwards on the tightest of angles. It also features a unique pen in a farmyard where three team members must have jumped in before the leader can turn 90deg and pop out and a water jump which usually claims a 'swimmer' or two! When the victorious team gallops down the final hill to the finish, they will have truly earned the title of British National Team Chase Champion.

Sponsors George Goring of The Goring Hotel and James Buckle of Material Change are both seasoned team chasers who have enjoyed the challenge of the sport.

George, who is still a key member of the legendary Boring Gorings team at the age of 73 says: "Team chasing offers an excitement that is unique and addictive, and we are very glad to support it. The championship is the pinnacle of the season and we are thrilled to have qualified once again."

The National Championships offers a full day out for competitors and spectators, with spectacular viewing of the course from the hospitality area. In addition to the Championship class, the event hosts the UK Hunt Team Chase, in which teams are made up of hunt staff and subscribers and the highly competitive Fernie Intermediate, both held over a shorter version of the open track, with many of the same meaty hedges!

Kicking off the day, the novice class gives less experienced combinations a taste of the fabulous Fernie hunting country, and for the very fit, there is also the opportunity to run the course on foot!

A trade stand village and children's entertainments, plus a bar, barbeque and video screen will keep all members of the family occupied as well as enjoying the action on the course.

While most of the qualifying events are currently in the Midlands and south, team chasing has strong northern following. Two of the teams making the journey south for the championships are the FSL Barnsley Babes N A Banker and Team Ride Away.

Emma Fox, captain of the Barnsley Babes first became interested in team chasing when her employer, Rockwood Harriers MFH Liz Eadon, was competing at the championships.

“I advertised on the internet for other riders to join me and started with intermediate classes but soon wanted to do the open. Amy Meecham and Sarah Coles who live locally were keen to have a go, and we eventually joined forces with Fraser Marshall who comes up from Hastings to ride with us,” she explained.

Emma had show jumped her 15 year-old mare Lightning but found her too sharp for affiliated classes. Team chasing suits her down to the ground, although Emma still had some control issues.

“I can turn right but not left! I’m now using a Liverpool driving bit and she goes well in that.”

The Barnsley Babes were initially renowned for their wild, slightly chaotic style, but with a few horse swaps and experience gained, they soon became more polished.

“We’ve got to know each other better, which helps. Lightning likes to be in front, but not too far ahead. She will sometimes even let Fraser’s horse Boysie overtake her now!”

They have now qualified for the championships three times, finishing 7th in 2011, and Emma hopes they will improve on that this year.

“We’d really like to be in the top six – we love the build up through the spring season, but the championships course is fabulous. Plus it’s a great day out, and an opportunity for our friends and family to see what we do.”

Stephen Clark and his family swapped racing for team chasing as Team Ride Away three years ago and have never looked back.

“We were looking for another equestrian activity we could enjoy as a family and this has ticked all the boxes,” he explains. “It is so competitive but so friendly – we get a warm welcome from the organisers and fellow competitors wherever we go.”

The team comprises Stephen and his daughter Ruth Carr, a successful flat race trainer and niece Ruth Andrews, all from York, who have been joined by team chase stalwart Bryan Allen.

“We thought that we could go straight into open classes, but the standard is incredibly high,” admits Stephen. “After qualifying for the 2011 championships, we decided to take a step back and aim for the intermediate accumulator (now the Coombe Farm Wines League) which we won.”

Team Ride Away – named after the family’s York saddlery business – are all mounted on ex-racehorses and Stephen comments: “Once they have seen the ditches, drops and rails and got a bit of experience they go very well, but it does take time.”

The Goring Hotel and Material Change open final is this season’s goal, and Bryan Allen is playing a key role, helping to source suitable horses and offering the benefit of his experience as a former national champion.

“Bryan is wonderful – he knows everyone and while he’s competitive, he philosophical when something goes wrong as it can in this sport. We’ve learned a lot from him,” says Stephen.

Team Ride Away are clearly looking forward to the national championships and Stephen comments: “It has to be one of the best courses in the country – the line of hedges and drops are a dream to

ride and the going is always good. If we qualify and line up for the final, we will certainly give it our best shot."

National Championships facts

The event takes place at Tur Langton, near Market Harborough on Sunday 1st April. Postcode LE8 0Pd for sat navs

Start time for the novice class is 9.30am, while the championships class takes place at 12 noon and the hunt/intermediate at 2pm

The championships course is 2.5 miles long and includes 30 fences, most of which can be viewed from the car park area if you don't fancy a walk!

Admission is £10/£15 (forward parking) per car and occupants. Refreshments and a bar will be available

Captions

Thrills and spills – the national team chase championships offers great viewing.

Barnsley Babes N A Banker in full flight.

Team Ride Away are aiming for a first crack at the national title.