

The Lowdown on Coop Safety

How to build — and jump — coops safely. **BY** LAURA ANN MULLANE

It's long been said that a foxhunter doesn't hunt to jump, but the other way around. After all, coops and other fences in the field are there to keep livestock contained — and thus keep farmers happy — while allowing hunters to cross the country quickly and keep up with the hounds. But ask any foxhunter and they'll tell you that jumping coops is, if not the goal of

hunting, certainly an exhilarating byproduct of it. Rosemarie Merle-Smith, a Master with the Tennessee Valley Hunt, recalls explaining "hilltopping" to her mother-in-law, Katherine — known as "Miss Kitty" when she was the riding instructor at Foxcroft School and a lifelong foxhunter — who replied, "What's the point of hunting if you can't jump?"

But jumping, of course, is not without its risks. That's true when you're alone with your mount in an arena, jumping brightly colored poles that collapse if your horse barely taps them on a course that's been measured to perfectly match a 12-foot stride and the footing is groomed with the utmost care. It's doubly true when you're out in the hunt field, on a chase, careening around corners in a



ROSEMARIE MERLE-SMITH

Properly designed and constructed coops can safely withstand the rigors of hunting for multiple seasons.

boggy field when a coop appears in front of you that must be jumped. Oh, and there are 25 other riders ahead of or behind you who will also be jumping it.

But the wild and woolly nature of foxhunting doesn't mean that hunt clubs can't take precautions to make coops in the field safer. Here are a few tips from those who've been building — and jumping — coops for decades.

STURDY AND SECURE

The resounding consensus in the hunt field is: The sturdier and more secure the coop, the safer it is. "The most important thing [in coop building] is that any jump is permanently attached to the ground so there is no chance of it moving when a horse touches

or hits it," said Ms. Merle-Smith. "A coop must never move or break. I've seen numerous wrecks from coops [that did]."

Her husband, Grosvenor, also a Master with the Tennessee Valley Hunt and formerly with the Bull Run and Keswick Hunts in Virginia, built coops in the early 1990s for Keswick that are still standing today. "I have watched a horse very closely hit a coop that wasn't secured," he said, "and as the coop started to roll, the horses' hooves cleared the top, only to continue on and become tangled in the rolling coop, ultimately being trapped under it. The horse flipped and landed on the rider. I've heard of a few other accidents that sounded exactly the same. All resulted in serious injury or death."

To keep their coops as secure

as possible, the Merle-Smiths set pressure-treated posts in the ground, usually two at either end to serve as both a brace for the wire fence the coop is straddling, and as a wing for the coop. Then everything ties into the posts. Their coops are made with seven 1 x 6 oak boards. Oak is strong enough that it can take a beating — both from horses and

the elements — and still last for years. "You don't want anything the horse can put a hoof through," said Ms. Merle-Smith. It's also critical to build coops with a pointed top — versus a flat one — so a horse doesn't bank the jump and punch a hoof through the top, another dangerous scenario.

The minimum height of the Tennessee Valley Hunt coops is three feet, with some as high as three foot six inches. "There's a new trend to build coops lower than three feet so more people are comfortable jumping them," Ms. Merle-Smith said. "But if you do that, the farmer is going to have to put a rail or wire across the top and someone is going to have to take it down before the field jumps it. It defeats the purpose of being able to move across

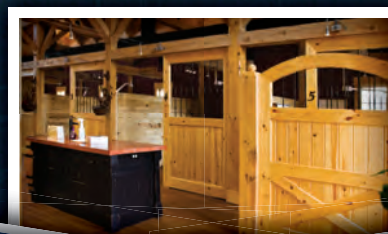
Integrity. Craftsmanship.

SYLVAN STOLTZFUS BUILDERS L.L.C.



DREAM... DESIGN... BUILD!

- RESTORATIONS AND ADAPTIVE REUSE -
- TIMBER FRAMING, EQUINE FACILITIES -
- GARAGES AND ACCESSORY STRUCTURES -
- CUSTOM DECOR AND ACCENTS -



1-800-881-9781

stoltzfusbuilders.com

the country quickly.” Still, some hunts will run wire (contained within PVC pipe) or boards over the top of smaller coops so the hunt staff and first field can jump them when they’re on a line, while the second and third fields can take down the wire or board to make the coop more inviting for less experienced riders.

Other hunts just make the coops smaller. The Arapahoe Hunt in Colorado, for example, measures most of its 125 coops at about two feet six-inches. “We don’t use a top bar and haven’t had any issues with cattle climbing over,” said Zach

The resounding consensus in the hunt field is: The sturdier and more secure the coop, the safer it is.

Ward, a member of the hunt and volunteer coop-builder. “Higher than two-foot-six intimidates a lot of people. But any lower than that, the horses don’t take them seriously.”

Ward concurs that the safest fences are the sturdiest ones. “What’s dangerous is having coops that are in disrepair — with nails falling out and boards sticking out.” His materials of choice are pressure-treated 2 x 6 boards — anything smaller tends to warp faster, especially in the dry Colorado climate. He builds the coops in an A-frame construction, with the bottom boards two to four inches off the ground when the coop is first set. This

allows the coop posts to settle further into the ground, making it even more secure.

There’s also the question of whether to leave gaps between the boards that comprise the coop. Some say there should be no gaps, pointing out that large gaps can result in a hound’s paw or horse’s hoof getting caught. The other side argues, however, that a fence that looks too solid might encourage a horse to try to climb over it, rather than jump it, which could cause a horse’s foot to punch through. In both cases, the worst-case scenario is not one anyone wants

to experience. MFHA guidelines recommend placing the two top boards of the coop snugly against each other to prevent hounds from catching a toenail when they bank the boards. The other boards can have small gaps between them. (For more details, see <http://www.mfha.org/docs/articlebuildingsafercoopsbynorm-fine.pdf>.)

Although the particulars of coop building may vary according to local landscape and climate, a well-built coop should do its job over the course of several years — even decades. “A good coop,” Mr. Merle-Smith explained, “discourages cattle from climbing over it, yet are inviting and inherently safe for horses to jump.” He notes that the angle of coops allows a horse to hit them fairly hard and yet still slip over them safely.

“The safest coop,” he added, “is one that is absolutely rock solid and bomb-proof — period.”

RIDING BETTER

The second most critical element of jumping safely is, of course, the riding itself. Ms. Merle-Smith, who’s been a trainer and instructor for decades, says the quality of the riding in the field has declined in the more than 30 years she’s been hunting. “When I started hunting, there really weren’t hilltoppers,” she said. “They were grooms with green horses or kids on ponies.” Now, the hilltoppers can be the largest field in a hunt. “We need to get people to step up and be comfortable jumping three feet and three-foot-six,” she said. “We give people so many different options now so they don’t have

to jump, but it keeps people from growing and becoming better riders.”

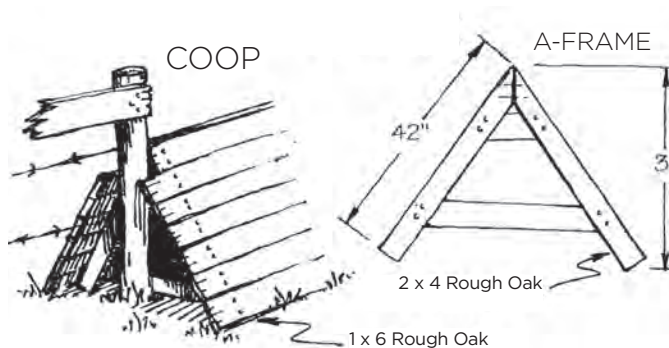
She noted how many people don’t ride in the summer, then turn up in the fall out of shape and rusty — and mounted on out-of-shape and rusty horses. “You can’t let a horse sit around in a field for five months, then take it out for cubbing in September and expect it to do fine,” she said.

Cathy Wieschhoff, a long-time foxhunter and upper-level eventer, agrees, saying that many foxhunters just don’t ride enough to improve their skills.

“They used to call them ‘punters’ in England — the people who would come out from London

how to get a distance. It’s about hanging on to the mane and letting the horse figure it out.”

It’s these riders, Ms. Merle-Smith said, who are the most at risk of injury in the field. A coop can only do so much to keep a horse and rider safe. In the end, it’s up to the rider to be able to get their



horse to the jump in a way that he can clear it without hurting himself, his rider or those around him. 🐾
 “I would be helping these horses get their distances and set them up for the jump, but Edith told me that these riders don’t know

for a day of hunting, but never ride otherwise,” she said. She recalls training young foxhunters for Edith Conyers in Kentucky.

Laura Ann Mullane is a frequent contributor to *Covertside* who hunts with *Caza Ladron* in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

dubarry
of Ireland

Pictured:
Elmtree Coat, loden
Cork Chelsea boot, cigar suede

dubarry.com

1-866-658-3569