

NO WORRIES

Under the leadership of huntsman Brian Kiely, Myopia Hunt has led the way in innovating new **drag hunting** techniques

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATE ERICKSON

THE MYOPIA HUNT CLUB on Massachusetts' North Shore has long been celebrated as one of the United States' most historic and venerable foxhunts. In the past year and a half, however, this New England drag hunt has also become one of the country's most innovative, thanks to the ground-breaking training techniques used by huntsman Brian Kiely.

Kiely, originally a native of County Waterford, Ireland, took up the post as huntsman at Myopia after previous positions in locations as diverse as Los Altos (Calif.) and Ireland. Despite so many years of hunting experience, however, he did not come to Myopia as an expert in drag hunting.

"I had never drag hunted until I got the job last March," recounts Kiely on an off-season tour of the hunt's South Hamilton, Mass., headquarters. "I applied for the job, got it, and thought I should learn something about it!"

Despite the differing geographical require-

ments of drag and live hunting — drag hunting being the practical necessity in some of our nation's more built up and heavily populated areas such as the metropolitan Boston area — Kiely insisted from the outset that the Myopia hounds function as realistically close to a live hunting pack as possible.

"I don't do it any differently than the way you'd train to hunt foxes," he explains. "Whether it's foxes, rabbits, drag, or whatever, they have to do it right. My goal here was to make it as realistic as possible, so if you come out and see the hounds hunting, unless you are truly an expert foxhunter, you shouldn't be able to see the difference [between live and drag hunting]."

Kiely's broad range of experience helps to drive home the importance of a consistent overall philosophy, despite the change from live to simulated quarry at Myopia. "Everywhere I've been — hunting coyotes in California, foxes in Ireland, and drag here, I've trained the same general way

each time." However, though the end goal of a well-trained and responsive pack has remained unchanged at every hunt, the specific nature of drag hunting presented Kiely with several unusual challenges — and ultimately, innovative solutions.

QUARRY FROM KENNEL TOYS

The most glaring difference between live and drag hunting is, of course, the existence of live quarry. This reality presents the drag huntsman with an interesting problem to overcome: How does one signal to the hounds that the hunt has come to an end for the day?

Often, the solution has been merely to end the drag, perhaps sometimes with some dog food at the end of the line or the drag lure hung in a tree or buried in an earth. This approach, however, didn't truly simulate the feedback and reward system present in live hunting, where packs do sometimes account for the quarry they are pursuing. To make the drag hunt as realistic as possible, Kiely realized



Brian Kiely carries his tennis ball everywhere, and uses it as the reward for the hounds at the end of the hunt.

that he would need to incorporate a different kind of reward system to indicate to his pack that the day's hunting was over.

Enter the tennis ball. After reading books on training service dogs for military and police work, Kiely was struck by the use of toys such as balls as positive feedback. "The dogs that they use for police work — labs and cocker spaniels — their reward for when they find drugs, or bodies, or whatever they're looking for, is their toy," explains Kiely. "When they're puppies they play with a certain toy, and that becomes their reward later on. So that's what I do with the hounds."

Kiely makes a daily routine out of playing with the ball, bringing it with him on every walk and hunt. "When I take the hounds for a walk, I throw a tennis ball for them, and their buzz is off the ball," Kiely says. "They're walking along quiet and calm, and then when I produce the ball, they go ballistic. I realized that this could be a good thing, and so it's their reward."

The end result: at the end of each hunt's last line, Kiely hides a tennis ball for the pack to discover. Sometimes this bouncing yellow 'quarry' lurks under a clump of rocks, or in the stump of a tree, or even buried under ground, but it is always there to provide a positive reward for the pack at the end of the day's work. Once the pack has discovered the 'quarry,' Kiely picks up the ball and throws it for the hounds.

"What Brian has done is make a reward out of play," says Dennis Foster, executive director of the Master of Foxhounds Association of America, underscoring the innovative techniques that Kiely has brought to the sport of drag hunting. "When they come to the end of the hunt, he starts throwing the ball, and the whole pack runs after it, and they're very happy. It's a unique approach, and it's working very well."

A NEW LURE

In order to get Myopia's 15 couple of American foxhounds to that hidden ball, however, there is first the issue of the lure. The lure is the central feature of the drag hunt; it replaces the live quarry and so allows the drag hunt to plan a navigated route through congested and otherwise geographically difficult hunting territory. Getting the artificial lure to replicate the behavior of true quarry is a difficult task. Kiely has approached the problem with several novel solutions.

“When I came here, they had a bottle of stuff for the lure that was a mix that they had used for years and years,” Kiely recalls. “I lay the line, but the hounds didn’t speak on it. They just ran. So I changed it and talked to some people, but none of the things I tried were working. So eventually I made my own mix.”

The problem with the lure is that it must be close enough to the smell of live quarry to entice the hounds, but also unique enough that the hounds will not be confused and drop the line in favor of true quarry. Eventually Kiely found a mix that worked: a secret blend involving traditional lure elements, plus the addition of glycerin to bind it together — a trick he learned from friends interested in deer hunting who use glycerin mixed with scent as bait.

“A lot of people use vegetable oil, but if you mix your vegetable oil and leave it, it’s going to separate,” Kiely explains. “With glycerin, I can shake it and mix it up, and it will stay.” It is also common practice to change the formulation based on the weather conditions of the day, but Kiely found that, once he had found a mixture that worked, he did not need to change it.

LESS IS MORE

Even more important than the composition of the lure, however, is the manner in which it is laid down. This is the moment where the ‘fox’ — the person charged with laying the drag on the morning of the hunt — can make a big difference in the realism of the hunting experience. “The ‘fox’ is a very, very important part of the job,” Kiely confirmed. “I go out with the guy who’s going to do it the day before and show him where to go and how to lay it, and it makes a big difference in the success of the hunt.”

In order to simulate a live hunt more closely, Kiely has made sure to design routes that try to mimic the route that live quarry would take: darting in and out of wooded areas, weaving and backtracking across open country before heading back into the woods again, and eventually winding from farm to farm in the spirit of a traditional live hunt. In Myopia’s somewhat constricted hunting territory, it is especially important to lay a complex and realistic line. “You don’t want the hounds guessing,” Kiely says. “With small country like this, the hounds will try to start to guess.”

Dogs of War: GAINING INSPIRATION FROM AN UNEXPECTED SOURCE

A dog-eared paperback sits on Brian Kiely’s kitchen table. It is “Dogs of War: The Courage, Love and Loyalty of Military Working Dogs” by Lisa Rogak. Though he happened on the book by chance, Kiely credits the book as an inspiration for his training philosophy with the Myopia pack.

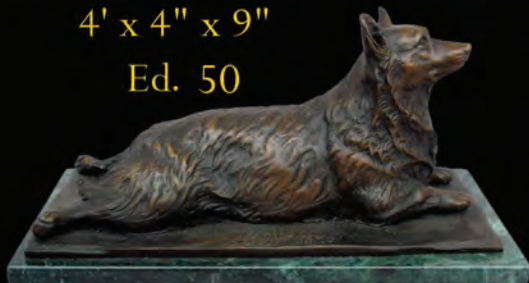
“I was reading it just on my own; it had nothing to do with this job. It’s a very interesting read,” Kiely says. Intrigued by the system of toy and food rewards described in the book as positive feedback in training military dogs, he began investigating canine service training further.

In a stroke of good fortune, the South Hamilton chief of police, Russell Stevens, had come from a career in training service dogs for the Connecticut State Police. Kiely spoke to Stevens several times and found many parallels between hound training and canine military training.

Kiely observes, “They want to pick a dog that’s best suited to a particular job, and we’re the same: we want a bold hound that wants to do its job.”

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Kiely brings a somewhat unique strategy to the challenge of the laying the drag, honed from years of observing live quarry at his previous positions. "If you watch a fox going across a field, it sort of bounces as it canters across — t doesn't leave a direct line." To simulate the light and sporadic line left by live quarry, Kiely eschewed the common spray bottle approach for laying drag in favor of something new: the humble tea towel.

"What we do is take a towel with some of the lure, put a string on it, and tie it to the back of a four-wheeler going quick across the ground." The end result is that the towel bumps and bounces along the ground, leaving a lighter and more sporadic trail than is commonly used in drag hunts.

"Less is more with drag hunting," Kiely says. He also reuses the same towel from the previous hunt to start the first line of the next hunt, so that the line is not too strong at the outset. "It was kind of a mistake that I made in the beginning that I'd lay a fresh line and they'd go blazing off," recalls Kiely. "Now I just lay the weakest thing, the last line from the day before, and it works much better."

Even down to the smallest details, Kiely has put a priority on producing a drag hunt that

simulates live hunting as closely as possible. For example, he does not lay the beginning of the first line at the hunt's exact starting location, as is often the case with drag hunts. "In a lot of drag hunts, you open the door of the truck and they're off immediately," Kiely says.

Instead, he favors the slower build up that is more common to traditional live hunts. "We meet up somewhere, sometimes at the kennels," Kiely explains, "and we hack out somewhere down the road. Eventually we draw for a fox, and it will take them a while to find something and go. We let them go free and pick up the line themselves."

The end result is a largely calm, amicable, and well-trained pack that comes as close to

simulating a live hunting experience as any drag hunt today. "Brian is a unique young man who is giving people a lot of ideas on how to make drag hunting more realistic and successful," comments Foster. "He's a huntsman who has brought the sport of drag hunting up several levels and closer to simulate a live hunt. Drag hunting and live hunting are different sports with the same goal, the joy and exhilaration of galloping across country after a pack of hounds in full cry." 🐾

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Remembering Don Little

KIELY'S REVITALIZED NEW PROGRAM comes in the wake of the one of the hunt club's greatest tragedies: the loss of longtime Master Don Little in February, who succumbed to injuries suffered in a show jumping accident in Wellington, Fla. Little was actively involved in the leadership of Myopia for over 23 years, serving first as a Joint Master from 1989-2001 and then as Master from 2001 until the time of his passing. He was 77.

Little was famous throughout his time at Myopia for his undying love of sport and enthusiasm for spreading the joy of foxhunting to everyone he met. Though Little and Kiely were never able to meet in person, it is clear that Little's vitality and love for the sport live on in Kiely's dedication to innovation and excellence



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