



Booli Selmayr hunts the Millbrook pack with more skill after her PDP experience.

KRISTEN EDLUND

Grad School for Hunt Staff

The Professional Development Program helps hunt staff hone their craft.

BY SUSAN HOFFMAN

The MFHA Foundation has a program designed to enhance and improve the skills of nascent hunt professionals and to encourage them to make a career out of hunt service. Now in its seventh year, the Professional Development Program (PDP) offers some unique experiences that would be difficult, if not impossible, to obtain on one's own.

Covertside asked the PDP Committee — Dennis Foster, Andrew Barclay, Tony Leahy and Marion Thorne — to tell us about the program's objectives.

COVERTSIDE:
Why is there a need for the PDP?

COMMITTEE:
In days gone by there was a progression in hunt service. It took many years to go from working in the kennels to second horseman, from second whipper-in to first whipper-in, and finally, to becoming a huntsman. These opportunities rarely exist today, due to time constraints and finances of both hunt clubs and of the individuals beginning their professional foxhunting career.

Also, hunts in North America are often located hundreds of miles apart, so the opportunity to visit other hunts and get to

know fellow staff and learn different ways of doing things just isn't realistic. Many of the smaller or more isolated hunts have limited peer-to-peer interaction.

The PDP addresses these issues with a program designed to develop more well-rounded and better-educated hunt professionals. It will never take the place of working one's way up the ladder, but it might help those who don't have that opportunity. And, it gives young people access to mentors, tools and peers so they can learn more about the technical aspects of hunting.

Former MFHA President Mason Lampton was a driving force behind developing this program. The MFHA board endorsed it and we're proud of our accomplishments over the years. It's interesting to note that the British saw what we were doing, recognized they had a similar need, and have since started their own version of the program.

COVERTSIDE:
What are the goals?

COMMITTEE:
Our goal has never been to train or "make" a huntsman. The goal is to be proactive and to encourage professionalism and compe-

tence in the hunt field and the kennels. The program does this by exposing young hunt staff to different best practices and different philosophies. We feel that by teaching about foxhunting's history and technical aspects, and by providing open access to experts and peers, we're helping enhance the careers of young hunt staff. By encouraging them to be the best they can be, in a positive way, we're also helping ensure the future of the sport.

COVERTSIDE:

How do you choose participants?

COMMITTEE:

Hunt staff who are interested in the program can find an application form on the MFHA website (<http://www.mfha.org/pdp.html>). The form asks them to submit information about their current hunt club affiliation and position, numbers of years with the hunt, previous hunt staff experience and to list three references. A critical part of the application is the short essay applicants must write stating why they want to be involved in the program.

The completed form needs to be submitted to the MFHA by January 31. We usually receive between 10 and 15 applications every year. The PDP officers review each application and we accept up to six participants annually. We consider each applicant's location, finances, who is the most qualified, and who will get the most out of the program. We also give first consideration to professional staff although we do accept honorary staff, too.

COVERTSIDE:

How does the program kick off?

COMMITTEE:

The activities begin in May to coincide with the official and traditional new employment year for hunt staff. Everyone who is accepted into the program meets at the Virginia Hound Show in Morven Park, Va. Participants spend the entire day going into the rings observing the judging. This gives them a wonderful insight into different people's opinions and most judges will spend a bit of time explaining their decisions.

The next day we go to a local puppy show where the participants have the chance to put what they learned to work. They don't get to judge per se, but we ask them who they'd pick as the winners of the classes, and why.

Some years we include kennel tours in conjunction with the Virginia Hound Show;

Education Advocates

PDP graduates are the program's best advocates because they have the opportunity to demonstrate and apply what they have learned to improve the hunt experience for their respective hunt clubs.

BARBARA "BOOLI" SELMAYR

**2010-2011 graduate
first whipper-in,
Millbrook Hunt Club, N.Y.**

"The PDP was an invaluable experience in the early stages of my professional foxhunting career. It opened my eyes to other hunting styles and techniques for hunting hounds and maintaining a kennel. I also observed what different huntsmen and whippers-in find crucial in order to 'make a day,' depending upon the hounds, countryside and conditions they had to work with. The literature we were given to study played a major role in understanding the ups and downs foxhunters face every day, and enabled us to speak about the sport more freely and from a more educated perspective. The program mentors are among the best in the sport and I am fortunate enough to have been able to have access to them. Different hunts do things in different ways, but thus far I have yet to meet another professional who isn't ready and willing to provide guidance to those looking for it. The support system among foxhunting professionals is unlike any other sport."



ADAM TOWNSEND

**2008-2009 graduate
whipper-in,
Elkridge-Harford Hunt Club,
Monkton, Md.**

"I really enjoyed my experience in the PDP. I found the reading list of classic and current hunting books to be thought-provoking outside of the daily grind. It is easy to get wrapped up in your daily foxhunting chores, but through the program I was able to reflect on various aspects of the sport by sitting down and doing a write-up about what a certain passage or statement meant to me and how it could correspond to what I was doing within my hunt. Having the opportunity to visit another hunt for a week was very special; it allowed a private look into what another club does on a daily basis and provided me with access to being 'in the huntsman's pocket.' Most important to me was the relationship I formed with Andrew Barclay. As a young professional, that was priceless because to have a true professional such as Andrew, with his decades of service and experience, help me through questions, or provide feedback, or just to check in, meant a great deal to me and still does to this day."



other years we meet later in the summer for a two-day kennel tour. Kennel tours are one of the most valuable uses of participants' time because they are watching some of the best and most experienced huntsmen and staff in the country handle their hounds.

We also invite a large-animal veterinarian to talk to participants about horse and hound health, nutrition, breeding, first aid and the like.

COVERTSIDE:

How does the program work with host hunts?

ANDREW:

The program sends each participant to hunt with another hunt. We choose where they will go by a number of factors including riding ability and the type of hunting they do. For example, if they hunt fox we might very well send them to a hunt that hunts coyote, or the other way around. We also factor in location and the best time of year for them to do this, taking into consideration their staff responsibilities and what is most convenient for the hunt club. They will spend time with the hosting hunt staff and have several days of hunting with them. These hunting trips have proven to be a wonderful experience and we find the hosting hunt clubs have been very generous with both time and knowledge. While they are hunting, participants are expected to spend time with the huntsman, whippers-in and in the kennels.

Someone on the PDP committee will always spend at least one day with each participant to hunt with them and their hounds and make observations on what we see. Afterward, the participant gets a letter that details our observations and advice.

COVERTSIDE:

Are there any non-hunting activities that enhance the learning experience?

COMMITTEE:

Absolutely — this is a crucial part of the program. Because the Virginia Hound Show is near the MFHA office in Millwood, Va., participants spend a day in the office learning what we do there and how the organization works. We provide them with a packet containing wonderful books, pamphlets, DVDs, tapes and videos about foxhunting and hounds. The participants take the packet home and are given a different assignment each month using one of packet's resources.

This part of the program is open-book and conducted via email. Typically, we'll ask questions about a book or tape's contents; the participant sends written answers back to us; we make corrections and provide comments. Participants must also write about any trips they take in concert with the program, including the Virginia Hound Show, kennel tours and hunting with various hunt clubs.

COVERTSIDE:

How much time does the program take?

COMMITTEE:

We can't estimate actual hours, but it does take a lot of dedication over the course of a year. Most of the program participants are also working full time for a hunt. They get up at ungodly hours to hunt and often work late into the evening. So, in addition to their already tremendously long day, participants also need to be available for at least a few days in spring to attend the hound shows and take the kennel tours, and a few days during hunt season to ride with the hosting hunt staff. The participants also get together as a group once or twice a year for official functions like the bi-annual staff seminar and the program graduation the following May.

Then there's the time needed to study and be quizzed about the materials in their educational packet. The reading time is considerable; they are given eight or nine lengthy hunting books as well as other material. We want to stress this because we want people to understand the amount of work involved. In the past we have met with a bit of resistance from some Masters due to concerns about staff spending time away from their own kennels. We have found these concerns are simply not true. The time spent over the course of a year away from the participant's home hunt club is both minimal and flexible. And, we work with club Masters to pick a time that works best for everyone.

COVERTSIDE:

What can participants expect to achieve?

ANDREW:

Participants definitely get out what they put into it. We've had some people who were stellar students — very focused, professional and inquisitive — who were invited to hunts in addition to the hunts we sent them to. Those kinds of people get the most out of the pro-

gram. Adam Townsend, currently whipper-in at Elkridge-Harford Hunt, and Barbara Selmayr, currently whipper-in at Millbrook Hunt (see related story, page 36), are good examples. Both of them were outstanding students and got a lot out of the program.

Still, there have been others who just did the minimum and not much more. We've even asked a few participants to leave the program before the end of the year. We know we can't make a huntsman or whipper-in but we can broaden the horizons of those who want more knowledge and experience.

Many of the participants stay in touch with each other. They've developed a great support network for batting about ideas and soliciting advice. They converse about how to do things better and share experiences. We think this kind of engagement is great for the sport.

COVERTSIDE:

What's next?

COMMITTEE:

The program is ever-evolving. We are now looking at ways to expand it to young people who might not even realize there are occupations in this field. Up to now, we've been concentrating on people who already have their foot in the door. Now we want to reach out to other young people who are looking for equestrian jobs. We want them to see this as a meaningful, fulfilling career path. So we're in contact with various equestrian universities, county agricultural extension services, 4H clubs, pony clubs, the Intercollegiate Horse Show Association, and even rodeo schools.

COVERTSIDE:

How can people find out more?

COMMITTEE:

Although we don't heavily promote the PDP, more people are finding out about it now that it is entering its seventh year. We outline the program's activities and benefits on the MFHA website (<http://www.mfha.org/pdp.html>). If anyone is interested or has any questions, anyone on the committee would be happy to speak with them. 🐾

Susan Hoffman hunts with Andrews Bridge Foxhounds in Pa. She is a regular contributor to *Covertside* as well as other equine, canine and feline consumer and veterinary media. She is also president of Susan Hoffman Associates, a full-service marketing communications company (www.susanhoffmanassociates.com).