

Five Questions for Nigel Peel

By Lauren R. Giannini

In 2010 Nigel Peel, MFH & Huntsman North Cotswold, UK, became the first person from overseas to receive the Julian Marshall Award. Presented annually since 2001 during the Bryn Mawr Hound Show at Radnor Hunt, it honors living individuals for their lifetime contribution to hunting and hounds. Nigel had been invited to judge the Grand Championship at Bryn Mawr, the weekend after he officiated in the English ring at the Virginia Hound Show at Morven Park.

"It was a great honor to be given the Julian Marshall Award, and I was completely taken aback. It was a wonderful surprise," admitted Nigel, whose 'career' spans 40 years.

Since 1988, Nigel as MFH/huntsman and his MFH wife Sophia have been at the helm of the North Cotswold, a renowned pack in the UK. He served three terms on the British MFHA committee and currently is a member of the Hunt Staff Benefit Society Committee, chaired by HRH the Prince of Wales.

North Cotswold may be a smaller pack, but they have won the championship three times at Peterborough, the biggest hound show in the UK, as well as garnering titles at every hound show in which hounds have ever entered.

Sidelines: What led you to become a huntsman and master?

NP: My mother hunted, both my parents were very keen hunting people. In Sussex we had an extremely good, old-fashioned master and I used to go with him when I was very young and open the gates. He wasn't very fond of jumping and he put in a lot of gates. He hunted the hounds and was master for 55 years with the Chiddingfold & Leconfield. When I left school I went to Cowdray. After a season, a pack in Yorkshire was looking for a master and they took me: I wasn't quite 20 and I hunted the Goathland. It's a wild, northern country with very few foxes. I stayed there for two seasons. Then I hunted the Cambridgeshire for the Crossmans, whose family had been masters for many generations. You had to hunt the fox — you couldn't just gallop after it, and that taught me a great deal. I've always been very grateful to the Crossmans.

From there I went to Taunton Vale — wonderful all-grass galloping, fast country. I enjoyed that tremendously and I had to go home. I became joint-master and huntsman with Richard Barlow who had started me off. He hunted the dog hounds and I hunted the bitches. That went on for nine years. Then, my brother-in-law rang up and said the North Cotswold was looking for a master. Sophia and I took on the hounds, and we've been here since 1988.

Sidelines: What's the connection between the North Cotswold and Hillsboro in Tennessee?

NP: We have two other joint-masters, Brad and Janie Hooker. They're both American: their father is Henry W.



Nigel Peel, MFH/Huntsman, poses with the mostly 'ladies' pack of North Cotswold hounds for Horse & Hound magazine before mounting up. The North Cotswold country is located in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire, north of the famous Cheltenham race meeting and the university town of Oxford. Photos by Nico Morgan

Hooker, MFH of the Hillsboro Hounds.

There's another great connection: back in 1939 with the war on us, Bill Scott [then master/huntsman] who was a great friend of Mason Houghland [founder of Hillsboro in 1932] sent a draft of hounds from the North Cotswold to Hillsboro: he didn't want them put down and we couldn't feed them because of the war. That blood still runs in the Hillsboro pack.

Sidelines: Do you have an all-time favorite foxhunting horse?

NP: I've been so lucky — I've had so many wonderful horses. I suppose one of the best horses I ever had was a little colored horse, only 15.1h. He was called Geronimo — also known as The Pink Pig — and he was a quite well known horse in the West Country. I had him since he was four and I hunted him for nine seasons. He was as good a timber-jumper as I've ever ridden. You could walk him up to a five-bar gate and he'd leap over it. He was wonderfully athletic and a lovely horse to ride.

Sidelines: What do people need to know before they cap with North Cotswold?

NP: Like most countries in England now, we have a lot of hunt jumps and a lot of gates. It's a rolling country with hills and you can see very well. The great thing is you don't have to be a wonderful horseman to get after the hounds, and if you are a wonderful horseman, you'll have a lovely time jumping fences all day. It's a country for all comers, for all sorts and conditions of people.

Sidelines: Any suggestions for those who aspire to be a whipper-in, a master or even a huntsman?

NP: Dedication and hard work, and remember — just because you wear a red coat doesn't mean that you are always right.