

# FOXHUNTING LIFE

*with Horse and Hound*

DOUGLAS LEES PHOTO



Orange County Hunt (VA)

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## Matthew Cook Is New Farmington Huntsman

By Elizabeth Sutton

“New” is hardly the word to use when writing about the sport of foxhunting in general, and even harder to use with a club as dedicated to tradition as central Virginia’s Farmington Hunt Club. Change is always a challenge! But our *new* huntsman Matthew Cook has been changing things all around since he arrived in Free Union three years ago—raising a new level of hunting sport with a growing list of firsts.

Cook entered Farmington hounds in the Virginia Hound Show in May, 2014 for the first time; he took a carefully picked few hounds to meet prospective foxhunting juniors at the local 4H club last spring, and he accompanied his daughter Pippa along with a group of Farmington juniors to compete for the first time ever at the finals of the Junior North American Field hunting championship in Lexington, Kentucky just last October. Most recently, he prepared Farmington hounds to compete in a **foxhound performance trial** at the Belle Meade Hunt in Thomson, Georgia in January 2017.

Matthew brought his family to Free Union in 2013 to fill the boots of former huntsman Daron Beeney, who went home to Great Britain after a decade of valued service to FHC. The Cook family’s road to Virginia had traversed not only the entire USA, but it included numerous international places in between. His journey as a huntsman started in the south of England where he worked as gamekeeper before entering hunt service in 1994 as kennelman for the Chiddingly and Cowdray Hunt.

### Starting a Career in Hunting

“My first knowledge of foxes began with hating them,” he said with a chuckle. “Working as a gamekeeper they were a pest.”

Matthew went on to describe his climb up the training ladder. First, learning to ride at Cowdray, he learned the business “from bottom to top” he said, graduating to duties as second whipper-in with the Surrey Union Foxhounds and later working with the Tiverton Foxhounds, as well as Vine and Craven north of the Hampshire Hunt. In 2000 he applied for an opening near Omaha, Nebraska.



“My first knowledge of foxes began with hating them,” said Matthew Cook with a chuckle. “Working as a gamekeeper they were a pest.” / Cathy Summers photo

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"We were young," he remembered, and he and his wife wanted to go west "to see the world." During his years in Nebraska with the North Hills Hunt the couple started a family, and soon, with three or four seasons under his belt, it was time to move again.

"I only had a temporary visa," recalled Cook, "So I had to leave (to go back to Europe)."

**Globetrotting**

This time the Cooks moved to Rome, where Matthew served from 2004 to 2006 as huntsman for the Roman Foxhunting Club, "Societa Romana Della Cacciatore alla Volpe." Julie Cook recalled, "We lived at the kennels which were on the Via Apia Antiqua, a very old cobbled road. We lived above the stables, [in a stone building heated by] nothing but a wood stove. [We] sent Charlie [their son] to the convent during the day to preschool so he could have heating!"

Matthew had a fantastic experience hunting fox. "There were lots of foxes on the military bases where we hunted...where no one else allowed to hunt," he said. "The officers had excellent horses and were good riders."

The young family fully enjoyed the weather, the sport, and the cultural advantages of their experience in Tuscany until it came time to look for better living circumstances and the best prospects for their children. So, in the fabled tradition of many ambitious pioneers, the Cooks moved once more, this time to northern California where Matthew carried the horn for Los Altos Hounds in Woodside. It was there Cook gained more experienced coyote hunting.

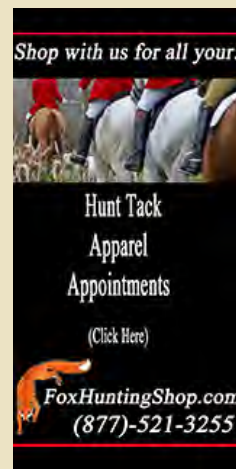
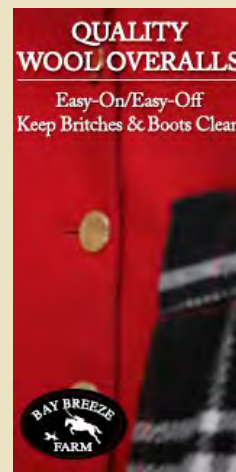
"Foxes are protected in California," he said, noting, "It's all Coyote." The country was wide open, and "the people were very nice. But the driving was what got to me. You spent days in the truck, it seemed. It was at least one-and-a-half hours one-way to go hunting, sometimes three hours. After a few years of that, I was done," he said. The Cook's two children were entering elementary school, and so when the opportunity presented itself to come east to answer the call for the Farmington Hunt Club opening in Virginia, the family was ready and willing to move again.

And so it was that with a truck, trailer, horses, hounds, pets, and household belongings the Cooks drove in to the kennels on Wesley Chapel Road to take up residence in the huntsman's house in Free Union Virginia in summer of 2013. They brought with them a willingness to work hard, to learn and to make some meaningful changes to the way things had been done for many years...like lifting the restriction on hunting coyote. This is the first season that the Farmington hounds have been allowed to hunt anything but fox.

"Since they [coyote] have become established in our territory, the foxes' hunting patterns have changed. We were constantly having to stop hounds when they got onto a coyote. That it was very discouraging for the hounds and for us," he explained. "We decided to go on and hunt them!"



Gone to Ground / Cathy Summers photo



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And that's not the only change. Inheriting a pack of a variety of types, including Crossbred hounds, Matthew is looking to add more American blood to the breeding program. "The way our country is, it's not always possible for me to get to the hounds where they are. [With the land divided by roads and boundaries, as well as many rivers and sometimes inaccessible, steep, and wooded terrain], I need to hear them. We are looking for a hound that can hunt the territory we are dealing with."

And hunt they do! With Cook working them hard within the confines of our territory, the pack has given us terrific sport, and the enthusiasm among the membership continues to grow.



(l-r) Matthew Cook accompanies daughter Pippa Cook in the third flight of the Belle Meade Hunt Foxhound Performance Trials. Tom Bishop is at the right. / Stephanie Guerlain photo

### Performance Trials at Belle Meade

For the first time ever, this year Farmington Hunt entered hounds in the **Foxhound Performance Trials** at the Belle Meade Hunt (GA) held from January 19 to 21. The excitement of this trip soon spread throughout our hunting community. *Seventeen* people, including MFHs Joy Crompton and Liz King, honorary whippers-in Tom Bishop, Carolyn Chapman, and road whips Kay Barquin and Ken Chapman traveled with their horses eight-and-a-half hours south in mid-winter to test our best among some of the premier packs in the country. Many of the FHC fixtures are located within an hour of the kennels, conveniently located near Charlottesville, so a road trip to Georgia is an adventure requiring grit and energy, as well as challenges for our hounds: travel, the risk, the distance, and...competition!

Naturally, severe winter weather had settled in Virginia, keeping the hunting stalled for the weeks prior to departure. Any concerns? I worried aloud as I talked with Matthew the week before he left. Would hounds be fit enough? I wondered.

With his characteristic optimism and good humor, Matthew quipped, "We aren't looking to win any prizes; this is just for fun. We will get to hunt our best with the best! It's all for good company and a good experience."

In the days after the trials, MFH Joy Crompton was glad to report that our hounds did well among the six hunts that participated, with FHC Comet placing in one of the divisions. And from all accounts, all who attended had memories of a lifetime. "It was great!" Matthew said upon his safe return. "We got out just in time." (Just ahead of the tornado that struck Georgia on January 22.)

Learn more about the Farmington Hunt Club by visiting their [website](#).

Posted January 29, 2017



MARK LEXTON

