

# HUNTER PACE!

BY NICKI ESDORN

Full is in the air and I start dreaming about one of my favorite things to do: I am riding along the most beautiful trails with one or two of my friends, across meadows with natural jumps, through a creek, and up and down hills with great views. It is early morning and a mist rises over woods and fields. We trot and tolt and canter, and we fly over some of the jumps. We are just having the best time riding across country, but if we do well and get lucky, we might even get to take home a ribbon! I am riding a hunter pace.

## WHAT IS A HUNTER PACE?

Hunter paces are based on the sport of fox hunting. Historically, hunt clubs organized them as a way to ride together in the off season and to train green horses to run and jump cross country. Many hunt clubs developed into local trail associations, groups whose mission it is to maintain a trail system and an equestrian lifestyle in an increasingly challenging environment. They realized that putting on a hunter pace was a great way to showcase their trails, recruit new members, and raise funds for their work or benefit a good cause.



A colorful team of four is making a big entrance at the finish line of the Memorial Day hunter pace in Bedford. Nicki on Haukur Freyr, Ashleigh Bancel on Sjarmur, Caroll Bancel on Topas, Julie Testwuide on Gyllir. Photo by Chris Bancel.

There is no overseeing governing body for hunter paces, and the rules tend to vary according to location, terrain, number of teams, and concerns of the organizers. Teams of two to four riders ride along a marked trail from start to finish. Their ride is timed. However, a

hunter pace is not a race! Usually, an experienced rider on a fit hunter rides and jumps the course very early in the morning, at a pace “as hounds run” and sets the optimum time. The optimum time remains secret until after the pace is over. The team with the time closest to the optimum wins, whether that is faster or slower. So yes, one has to be a bit lucky to win. The goal is rather to have great fun riding and to show good horsemanship.

Many paces are divided up into several categories. It used to be hunters and non-jumping “hilltoppers,” but usually it is now “hunt” (fastest, jumping), “pleasure” (slower, jumping optional), “western” (team must have at least one western style rider, no jumping), and “junior” (teams must have at least one junior rider under 16 or 18, slower than pleasure, jumping optional). The optimum times for the slower categories are usually set by the organizers. At a pace that runs for about an hour for the hunt category, the pleasure time may be about 10 minutes slower than the optimum hunt time, and the junior and western times 20 to 25 minutes slower. No rules, though.

Icelandic horses are perfect for hunter paces. They are fast enough to



Nicki and her young mare Alfrun enjoying a good gallop at the Bedford pace. Photo by Kathy Mathew.





Haukur Freyr and Fengur really enjoy jumping and it shows! Nicki and friend Carolyn Abernethy at the finish line jump of the Bedford Pace. Photo by Kathy Mathew.

win a ribbon even in the hunt category. They are sure-footed and love going across country. Many enjoy jumping and they naturally excel at going as a team. The spectators love to see us tolt close together all abreast across the finish line!

### HOW TO RIDE A PACE

When I first started riding hunter paces, a good friend and experienced hunt rider told me “you canter where you can, walk where you must, and trot everywhere else.” This simple rule works. Riding an Icelandic, of course, you also get to tolt. I used to ride hunter paces with my friend on his big hunter: My spirited Fengur kept up just fine in tolt with their ground-covering trot.

Horses of all kinds of breeds and riding styles come together at a hunter pace, no longer just field hunters. In a real hunt, the faster rider has the right of way and the slower ones must get out of the way quickly. Most hunter pace organizers have changed this rule for safety reasons. Many horses get excited and nervous when others come up behind them at a fast pace and then gallop away after passing. It is good horsemanship to approach slowly, ask for permission to pass, and then ride off at a calm trot. If a faster team approaches, one should take the next opportunity to stand aside and let them pass.

The course is clearly marked with arrows on brightly colored signs. The jumps have a white flag on the left and a red

one on the right, and all have go-arounds. Some paces have mandatory walk areas to give the horses a break. Others will have a check point, sometimes even with a veterinarian present, to make sure the horses are okay to continue.

The trail organizations are proud of their events and will lead the course over their very best terrain. The Bedford Pace in my area usually has over a hundred teams participating, and they serve a delicious catered lunch under a big tent. Other hunter paces are much smaller and laid-back, with chili served to riders sitting on haybales and rocks. One hunter pace is run around Halloween and just about everyone comes in costume. There is a sense of fun and camaraderie as everyone is enjoying the ride.

### HOW TO PREPARE YOUR HORSE

First of all your horse must be fit enough for a one- to two-hour fast trail ride. Build up stamina over several weeks and months, increasing trot and tolt intervals and including a long canter and some gallop in your rides.

Practice riding in a small group, alternating positions as first, middle, and last rider. Practice passing one another, leaving and returning to the group. Practising standing still is useful for the wait at the start and check point.



Tolting abreast across the finish line ends the hunter pace in style, with Nicki on Alfrun and Hannah Huss on Fengur. Photo by Christoph Huss.





Matching Icelandic sweaters are a handsome outfit for a hunter pace on a cool fall day. Nicki on Haukur Freyr, her niece Lina on Fengur, and friend Caroll Bancel on Topas. Photo courtesy Greenwich Hunter Pace.

All Icelandics can jump over small obstacles and some really enjoy it. Start by walking over logs and then begin trotting low jumps in a light seat. If you have never jumped before, take lessons!

Make sure your horse is familiar with all kinds of natural obstacles like creeks, bridges, and mud. They should be safe crossing streets and walking along traffic.

The horse should be used to trailering and be calm with many other horses milling around.

### **PACE ETIQUETTE**

What to wear? If not sure, call the organizer and find out. Most hunter paces just mandate a certified safety helmet and boots. Hunt or show attire is not necessary; it is usually a much more casual event. Most teams come dressed in breeches, boots, and matching shirts, sweaters, or vests. I like to wear long Ice-

landic riding pants, jodhpur boots, and a polo shirt. Just neat and clean, including the horse and tack!

Arrive punctually at the start, at the time given to you when you signed up, as teams are started every few minutes. There are often several teams in the start area waiting to go. Consider that the horses will be excited and other breeds can be less social than ours. Keep a safe distance and beware of horses with a ribbon in their tail! They kick.

On the course be polite and safe, especially in a passing situation. Enjoy the ride and have a great time! The trail organization will appreciate it if you tell them you did.