



MASTER OF THE HUNT

... Photography

None of our email exchanges revealed that Adrian Jennings, the accomplished photographer of the Mooreland Hunt, was a Brit. After a few minutes of listening to his classic British accent, I imagined myself in 1920s riding gear, sipping tea in the drawing room of Downton Abbey while the Earl of Grantham explained how he came to photograph the hunt. Adrian even bears a bit of a resemblance to Hugh Bonneville the actor who plays Robert Crawley, the Earl of Grantham in the series. And they even sound alike, both speak quickly and passionately about their crafts.

By Sandra O'Donnell, Ph.D.
Photos by Adrian Jennings

So how did Adrian come to be in Huntsville photographing a 55-year-old pastime? The answer is a combination love story and job opportunity. After they married, Adrian and his wife Suzi, decided that if either got a chance to work abroad, they would take it, "no questions asked."

When the offer came up for Adrian in Huntsville, they said okay without even knowing where Huntsville was.

"We moved here temporarily for just two years, but we stayed for twenty. A good piece of why we stayed was Huntsville and the hunt."

Suzi was a journalist at the time. But her dream was to train horses and teach riding. Her whole life had been spent around horses. And the move to Huntsville made it possible for her to pursue her dream. That was one of the things that kept the Jennings in the US and particularly in Huntsville.

"Huntsville is a very equestrian area. But the big factor was the affordability of property here. There's no way that we could have owned the facility we had here in England. Not without investing millions of dollars. So, it was the perfect opportunity."

Early on, it became apparent, and this is where the love story comes in, if Adrian wanted to spend time with his wife, who competes at a high level in dressage competitions and who quickly became a regular of the Mooreland Hunt he needed to find a way to "love the horses."

Jennings came to the hunt through his wife. He isn't a rider, at least not as he says, "of anything with its own brain. That's really a rule to live by for me. I have ridden a very small number of times but it's not something that particularly excites me. To be honest, before Suzi and I met, I'd not been around horses, at all."

Adrian and Suzi met in high school. When she first introduced him to her horse, it did not particularly take to Adrian. He jokes that the horse sensed a little competition in its life. He remembers, the horse was "tied to a gate and managed to yank the gate off its hinges and charge out into a field, dragging the gate behind him. Suzi jumped out in front of the horse and got it calmed down and detached from the gate and walked him back over to me. Then promptly asked me if I wanted to get on and ride. I immediately said something like Hell no!"

Luckily for him, it wasn't a deal breaker that the horse didn't take to Adrian. Suzi wanted him to enjoy the horses in some way, and he realized if he wasn't going to take part directly, he needed to find a way to share in her passion and appreciate it. Otherwise there would be a large part of her life that he wouldn't be involved in.

Growing up, Adrian had been surrounded by photography. His father, an amateur photographer, built a darkroom at home and did all of his own developing and printing. He also had an office mate who was a photographer and gave Jennings some of the best advice on photography anyone ever gave him. "Just go buy a camera and start taking pictures," he told me. "You know how lenses work, just go crackers. I have a degree in Physics, and I specialize in optics. So that was pretty good advice." But he never got serious about the hobby until attending the hunt with Suzi.

"We got a 4x4, and I jumped in that and followed the hunt around the country. And pretty quickly, I started to enjoy it and developed a knack for guessing where the hunt was going to go. Soon, it became obvious that I should grab my camera and start taking pictures.

His first piece of advice for budding photographers is "just start taking pictures."

You won't be any good at first. There is a famous quote, I forget by who, that says, "My first 10,000 pictures were my worst."

The quote is from Henri Cartier-Bresson, considered a master of candid photos and the pioneer of street photography. His work has influenced many famous photographers.



That advice holds even more true today, in the age of digital photography, where taking a picture essentially costs nothing. For Jennings, the advent of digital photography has given budding photographers the freedom to experiment with what they take pictures of and how they take them. They can try different things. Depending on how good it is, they can delete the picture or keep it.

Jennings has kept every picture he's ever taken. "I've got, I don't know how many tens of thousands of photos. So yeah, absolute advice number one is just go and take pictures."

Advice number two which circles back to the hunt is to take pictures of something you love.

For Jennings, that is critical. His hunting story didn't start with photography. It began when he became a *foot follower*.

It was really about halfway through, 10 or so years into photographing the hunt that Adrian started getting serious. Two things changed at that point. He discovered digital photography and his relationship with the hunt evolved.

"Analog photography was fun, but digital added a whole new layer of control and challenge because I was directly responsible for all the post-processing. So there was the joy of taking the picture itself but then spending time with it and processing it was a whole new thing to learn, which ignited my passion."

By that time, Adrian was a solid fixture at the hunt. "People expected me to be there," he said. "I was carrying a radio and talking to the huntsman. The huntsman likes to have a truck on the hunt so if the hounds get too close to the road someone can see to their safety."

Understanding the Hunt

Foot follower: the people who follow the hunt on foot, truck, or bicycle.

The huntsman: The person who is responsible for:

- controlling and directing the pack during hunt.
- deciding which quarry to hunt if more than one prey is found.
- using the horn, to encourage, control and direct the hounds.
- steering the pack away from busy roads or land where access has not been granted.
- breeding and training the pack.
- caring for the hounds and the cleanliness of the kennels.



Becoming more a part of the hunt gave Adrian new insight. He started to understand why the huntsman made a particular sound as opposed to the sound he'd been using earlier. Why the hounds responded the way they did. Once he began to understand the mechanics of it, his photography changed, "my early pictures were very amateur snapshots of an activity my wife was involved in. When I became more immersed in the hunt, the images I captured were about me trying to convey something of what I was feeling through my photos."

"The hunt is a beautiful thing to watch and it's even a more beautiful thing to hear. It's a thrill to hear a pack of hounds at full cry, a field of horses thundering by, the huntsman with his horn. Add to that the fact that it's an extraordinary thing to look at, the horses are amazing, the hounds are fascinating, the countryside is stunning."

Adrian made a pact with himself that he would never publish a picture that he didn't love. He realized two things - no one would ever love a picture that he didn't love himself and, you can't take great pictures of anything unless you love what you are taking a picture of.

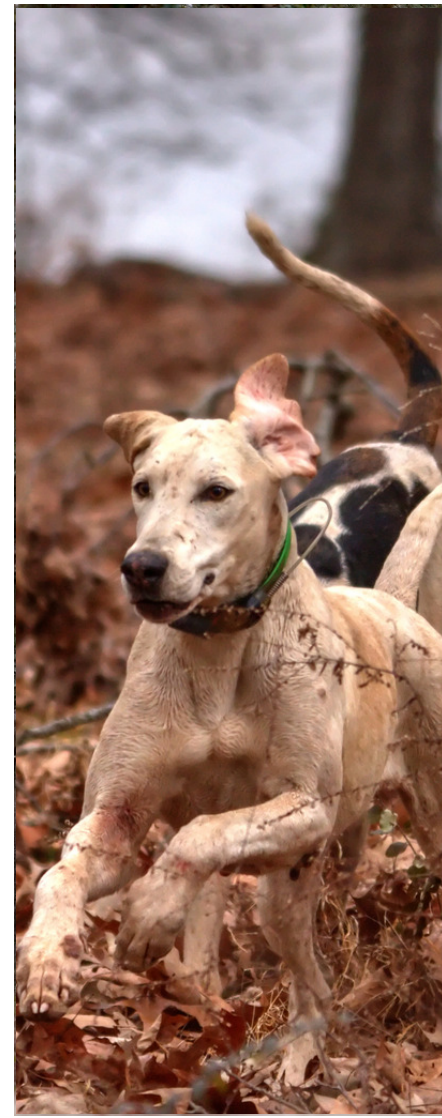
Maybe you already have a passion, go document that and share it with people. Or maybe you will develop a passion from photographing something unexpected. Maybe it's landscapes, it might be a sport, or it might be people or animals. Who knows? It could be exclusively sunrises. The important thing is to try to convey something of what you are experiencing at the moment, through your pictures.

For Adrian, with the hunt, there are three aspects conveying that experience: action, relationships, and landscape.

ACTION

With the action piece, you have to be where the action is. With the hunt, that means being in front of the action. To get there, he had to stop following the hunt and start anticipating it. He had to learn the country and understand it from the perspective of the quarry.

"Everyone loves a picture of action coming toward them because action going away feels as if you've been left behind. I always tell people you would much rather see pictures of hounds faces, than horses asses."



Adrian is limited in where he can go. He's in a truck. He can go off road, but he has to stay on trails. There are certain places he's not allowed to go. So he has to plot an intercept course and hope he can get out in front of the quarry and predict exactly where it is going and get ready for the picture.

This is where the immersive element comes in. He has to understand what is happening with the hunt and what is likely to happen. There are a lot of variables to consider. The direction of the wind and physical barriers – a river, a fence, a dense thicket can all impact where the quarry is likely to go. It's a guess and he has about a 50/50 chance of getting it right because coyotes are very habitual creatures. When he gets in the right spot, he has fractions of seconds to get it right.

"These shots are rather ephemeral. I have no control over almost anything in the environment. I have no control of where the picture is going to be, over the background, over the lighting. And I have very little time to get the most out of the moment as well. So, the fun part of action photography is being extremely quick. Having all of the muscle memory for getting the camera settings where I want them, getting the picture frame how I want it. Making split second decision about composition, and taking the picture. The best part of that is, I always know I have a great one when I hear the shutter go. I can sit back and know yeah, that's going to be a good one."

He's read a lot of photography blogs. They offer advice on the rules of composition, being a pro, shooting in manual mode, and getting everything set up before the shot.

Unlike landscape or portrait photography, with hunt photography to get the shot, you've got to get the truck stopped, jump out, get the shot framed, get the camera dialed in and hit the shutter. And, you've only got a few seconds to get all that done. For Adrian, that's what makes it exciting and it's really thrilling to get a great shot under those circumstances.

His favorite action shot? "There's one shot I can think of where the coyote is running in the foreground, with one of the whips in the background on a formal day (meaning he's wearing a scarlet coat).

That photo sticks in my mind because it's got great context. There's a difference between a picture of a coyote running around and a hunt. So, when I get the chance to give that context it's very satisfying."





He loves the action shots of the hounds as well.

"The hounds are amazing beasts. The sound of the hounds is incredible. At the beginning of the hunt, the huntsman puts the hounds into a cover. The whips (the mounted riders who support the huntsman) and the field are standing back. There's an intense quiet silence as the field waits for the hounds. Then you hear the first hound in the cover start speaking and it is joined by two or three other voices as the hounds come on.

There's a moment when you know that they've gotten a good scent. You can hear a change in their voices. If you are lucky, you'll see the quarry bolt from cover. On a good day, I'll get myself in exactly the right spot to photograph the quarry as it bolts. There's a moment when the whole pack opens up. To hear thirty or forty hounds open up their voices all at once and get on the run is spectacular." So one of my favorite action shots is the hounds bursting out of cover or running at full speed across a field. There's a saying that "you can throw a rug over them" when the hounds are running as a tight close pack, that's always an amazing thing to see, that level of cooperation. It's a team. They all have their own skills, and they work together, as a team. I like to share that, and I hope that comes across in the pictures."



"One of the best aspects of hunting is the way that people are there for each other and the support they give each other."

RELATIONSHIPS

What strikes me about Adrian's photos is the story they convey.

As a writer, I could write the story of a hunt using his photographs. One of the key elements of a good story is relationships and relationships are a key element in Adrian's photography.

"There are all kinds of moments before the hunt and after the hunt, punctuated by great social interaction. Before the hunt, people are getting their horses tacked up and then after, during the tailgate, there is a lot of interaction. That's when I shoot candid pictures from way back on a long lens, so people don't know I'm there and I can capture little moments that happen, small vignettes that are going on."

His favorite relationship shot? One in particular stands out for Adrian. It's of a young boy about to go out on his *first*, first flight hunt, which is an extremely big accomplishment.

Adrian explains that "he was a bit nervous about it. I'd just turned around and saw him lean down from the horse so his dad could give him a reassuring hug and I just shot from the hip and captured this amazing moment in this kid's life and a powerful moment of people being there for each other. I love that shot."

Understanding the Hunt

Flights: In the hunt, the riders are broken into three flights: first flight, second flight and third flight.

Traditionally, *first flight* stays up with the huntsman, goes anywhere at high speed, and jumps anything.

Second flight is a non jumping unit.

Third flight is reserved for the hilltoppers who walk or trot and stay as close as they can to the hunt while watching from the hilltops.





Adrian has an affinity for documenting hunt relationships - between horse and rider, between one horse and another, between riders and their families, but for him, the most powerful relationship on the hunt is between the huntsman and the hounds.

"They adore him, and he adores them. To be able to capture the hounds' adoration and respect for the huntsman and his love for them. I love documenting that."

His work shows those regular moments when the huntsman is standing around and a hound comes up alongside and he casually scratches the hound's ear. Adrian has learned that if he pulls the frame back on a scene, he'll get a picture of the huntsman scratching the hound's ear while he's chatting with someone. But if he zooms in on the hound, and cuts out most of the huntsman, he'll get a picture of rapture on the hound's face as he gazes upward. The focus shifts to the hound and the moment the hound is having. The viewer realizes "this interaction is special. To be able to capture that moment in the hound's life, I have to cut out the huntsman."

He's learned to walk around before the hunt and wait for those moments to happen, staying disconnected, keeping his long lens on him, just watching.

Often, there is nothing to shoot, but if you wait long enough, Adrian says, "a moment will happen. A funny or touching moment will happen that will convey a story if you are patient enough."

LANDSCAPE

When he started, he could have told you he would love action photography, or he would have loved taking pictures of people and animals, but he couldn't have predicted how much he loves the landscape.

Adrian explains that the hunt is often quite spread out. A typical scene will have a huntsman casting the hounds into a cover. The whips circling the cover, some close, some far. With two or three fields of horses spread about the hunt. Some of the scenes are quite expansive. Some scenes are much more intimate with nature making frames for pictures.

Adrian has been shooting the Mooreland Hunt for almost 20 years and that means he has photographed the same landscape over and over and over. One of his great challenges is how to make it different? How to find a different way to shoot a scene that he has shot so many times?

The landscape itself helps with this challenge because it changes. According to Adrian, fox hunting starts as soon as "the beans and cotton are off, which, is usually early November. And the hunt goes through planting which is around mid-March." For Adrian, the changes throughout hunt season make the landscape a rich and unpredictable subject. He focuses on line and texture to bring something different to his photographs.





"I look for lines of cotton stubble in a field that create intriguing shapes," he says. "Newly planted winter wheat growing up through cotton stubble creates incredible contrast in texture. A fallow field with vestigial corn growing, lit in a certain way by the sun offers unique shadows. There is no end to the way trees, that even in the dead of winter, with no leaves on them will add new qualities to a photograph. Not to mention the play of moss and bark, shadow and light in the woods."

So, the next bit of advice Adrian offers is, try to shoot the same thing in variety of ways. Because he's photographed the same subject, over and over, Adrian has been forced to find new and interesting ways to shoot the same landscape and action. Which, has made him appreciate both the hunt and the landscape that much more. "Photography teaches you how to look at things. I've really enjoyed looking at things in my life with a photographer's eye."



PRACTICE

While action, relationships, and landscape are the key elements in his photos, Adrian cites practice as the factor that has taken his photography to the next level.

"I always tell people, you don't have to have a camera to practice photography. There's not a moment that goes by that you couldn't look around and think to yourself how would I photograph this?"

It isn't always easy. All departure gates in the world look pretty much the same. The challenge is to find something beautiful or meaning in the moment.

For Adrian, you don't even need a camera. If you have one, and most people do now on their phone, go ahead and use it. But, if you don't, you can imagine the photo you'd take if you had all your gear with you. It's a fun challenge.

A perfect example is the opening hunt of the season. A member of the clergy blesses the hounds and the field and says a prayer. That ceremony signals the start of the season. It makes a great picture, but how many pictures of the masters lined up behind a variety of clergy can you take?

One year, Adrian decided to make the main subject subordinate to the scene. So, rather than focusing on the clergy, he took a picture of the hounds and blurred out the background with the masters and the clergy.

What he ended up with was a different picture of the opening ceremony, but still very much in the context of the hunt.

It's a challenge to find a perspective or angle that is a bit different. "Someone may have been standing right next to me taking the same picture of the opening the hunt and the prayer with the hounds in the foreground, and they may have focused on the masters, but I choose to focus on the hounds," Adrian said.

"Which, tells a different story. Now the story is about the hounds."

The intriguing thing about hunt photography for Adrian, is that there are these amazing macro scenes of stunning landscape punctuated by the action of the hunt and then there are these tiny vignettes of relationships within it all.



What would I choose as the subject? How would I frame it? How would I set the camera up?"

Adrian travels a good bit for his job. He spends a lot of his time in airports, on airplanes, and in taxis. Any time he's in one of those situations, he uses the opportunity to find something that he would be proud to photograph.

This practice grew out of the days he was on the hunt and thought, "Oh my gosh, I'm taking the same picture again. How many times have I taken this picture? How do I make this different. You hunt two or three times a week, and inevitably you find yourself seeing the same scenes over and over and over. And there are situations where there are even some very reliable coyotes that run in very reliable ways and cross at very reliable spots, and you think how I'm going to make this different?"



“Buy a tool.

**Invest in Adobe
Lightroom.**

Period, just do it.”

POST PROCESSING

There are two phases to photography. Taking the picture and processing the picture.

Adrian's best advice for processing is to play with pictures. He means playing with the tones, colors, brightness, and contrast. When you do this, you will develop a style and it will evolve over time.

"You can quite significantly change a picture in post-processing," he says. He doesn't mean photoshopping or adding things to a picture.

When he looks at his pictures now, and then looks at pictures from five years ago, he thinks, "Oh! I should really go back and reprocess those because they don't match my style now."

He tells those new to photography to buy a tool. "Invest in Adobe Lightroom. Period, just do it. It's a fabulous tool, easy to use with tons of control. They have a photographer deal where you pay a monthly fee and get Lightroom and Photoshop quite reasonably. That will get 90% of your needs."

He also recommends, looking at tutorials on YouTube."

But more importantly, he believes in experimenting, "take a photo and drag all the sliders around and hit all the buttons and see what happens. If you slide a slider over and you like it, great, keep it that way. If you don't, simply slide it back."

If the best way to learn to take pictures is to just go take pictures Adrian feels "the best way to learn processing is to just jump in and see what you like. If you like it, others will too."



As I look through the stunning photos Adrian sent me to accompany this article, I'm transported back to Lord Grantham's drawing room. It's difficult not to imagine myself in a different time and place when looking these images. Adrian's work captures a pastime that for many may feel far removed, while at the same time showing us what it is like to live immersed in one's passion – Adrian's love for photography and Suzi's love of horses. The takeaways are much bigger than photography. To live a passion we have to dive in, take risks, practice, and experiment. We have to be willing to learn, throw out what doesn't work, and get out in front of the action. And it doesn't hurt if the people we love are along for the ride, metaphorically or right next to us, in the actual saddle.