

Training for a Career in the Hunt

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A respected member of the nobleman's household was the huntsman. Unlike today's casual sport hunting, a medieval nobleman counted on the successful hunt to put food on his table and warm furs on his back and his bed in winter. He relied on his well trained huntsman to ensure that each hunt would indeed end successfully.

Every medieval trade begins with an apprenticeship period. The huntsman's training is no different. At the age of 7 a boy would become apprenticed to the master of the hunt. Here he would learn to get used to the demands of the job. His first job was to spend each day and night with the dogs. The apprentices slept in the kennels, making sure that there were no cold drafts or leaky spots in the roof. They were expected to clean the kennels out every morning. The water dishes were to be cleaned and refilled with fresh water twice a day. The straw bedding was to be changed every three days. The apprentice would thus get to know each dog's personality, his or her strengths and weaknesses, and should be able to call each dog by its name. There were other such physical labor type tasks to be learned and performed by the children, such as braiding horse tail hair to make the rope used to tie a pair of hounds together. Once the child was grown, he became a groom, and another child took his place.

At this phase in his training, the young man began to learn the more subtle, analytical skills of tracking game. The groom's main task at the hunt was to go out early that morning, before the nobleman even awoke, searching for the tracks made by the hoofs of the stag the night before. He had to be able to tell how long ago the tracks were left, whether the animal was walking or running, whether it was a stag or a doe, and whether it should be left alone or hunted. To train him in this task, he would set out at dawn with his sleuth-hound, looking for tracks made earlier by the master. The master used molds of stag hoof prints to make imprints in both hard and soft ground.

At some point, the groom becomes an assistant huntsman, but I was unable to pin down the requirements for that step. I am assuming that it is the job of the assistant to help the huntsman with all of his tasks, and in so doing, to learn to be the huntsman, to be the Master of the Hunt.

The long apprenticeship over, the assistant becomes a huntsman. He now wears heavy leather leggings to protect his legs from thorns and brambles, a green jacket in summer for stag hunting, and a fur jacket in winter when he is after the wild boar. Around his neck hangs the horn which he uses to call the hounds, and at his belt are a dagger for skinning the animal, and a long sword which he uses to kill game. During the hunt he takes three horses, two for relays, and in his gloved hand he carries a leather thong with which he strikes his boot to urge on the hounds. He is now master of the assistants and grooms, of the pack and the reserve pack as well. He knows each of his bloodhounds and greyhounds, and he decides where they will run in the pack depending on their qualities and shortcomings. During the hunt, it is his job to get the hounds back on the right scent if they have gone astray, and if he sees the stag, he takes care not to frighten it. He keeps an eye on the dogs and if they begin to tire, goes to them urging them on or feeds them bread from a sack which hangs from the pommel of his saddle. He is quick to

dismount to look for a trail if the stag has lost the hounds on a dust track, in a field where the grass has been burnt, or if it has crossed water. Finally, at the mort, it is he who kills the frightened, tired and breathless animal with his sword.