

Risking Life And Limb On A Horse

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Every spring timber racers risk their lives in a grueling bid to win Maryland's Hunt Cup.



On New Year's Day Jason Griswold, a 36-year-old owner of a Boston aviation leasing company, weighed his customary 200 pounds. The next day that started to change. For the better part of the last four months the 5-foot-11 Griswold has restricted his daily diet to 800 calories. He's jogged 3 miles a day and endured three "hot" yoga classes a week, during which he's worn a sweat suit "to make it hotter," he says. Griswold now weighs 160. "I have to be careful these days," he admits. "If I stand up too fast I'll pass out."

Griswold goes through this process so he can take a Thoroughbred over 5-foot fences at speeds of up to 35mph. Griswold is a timber racer, a member of a small,

blue-blooded band of obsessive amateur jockeys who compete in races across grass fields and up and over post-and-rail wooden fences. The competitions are held on the estates of the landed gentry in Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania.

Exhibition races (called "point-to-points") start in March. The real season begins in April, in the pastoral northern outskirts of Baltimore, with the My Lady's Manor in Monkton. That's followed by the Grand National in Butler. But these races are preliminaries to the Maryland Hunt Cup, which takes place at 4 p.m. on the last Saturday of April. It is the Super Bowl of timber racing and may be the most difficult horse race in the world. The grueling 4-mile course, interrupted by 22 jumps of up to 5 feet, takes place on a dandelion-flecked 605-acre estate in Glyndon.

This year will mark the 114th running of the Maryland Hunt Cup (the Kentucky Derby, known in horse-racing parlance as a "flat" race, will run its 136th race in May). Griswold, born and raised in Baltimore, works in Boston, where he lives with his wife and three young kids. He flies his Beechcraft to Maryland on spring weekends to race. This will be his fourth start in the Hunt Cup. He says he enjoys timber racing for the adrenaline rush. Blood also plays a role. Griswold is a descendant of Alexander Brown, founder of Alex. Brown & Sons and one of the creators of the Hunt Cup. Griswold's grandfather, father and uncle have raced in the event.

This leads to his primary motivation: A Griswold (pronounced locally as "grizzwold") has yet to win the cup. Jason's best finish is fourth. His grandfather was unsuccessful in five tries, his uncle in six. Jason's father, the silver-haired 68-year-old Jack (Jay) S. Griswold, entered his first Hunt Cup in 1960 and last raced in 1985 as a 43-year-old. He never won but came in second four times, which he believes is a record. Two near-misses stand out for him: In 1980 he finished second to the first female jockey to win the event (women have been allowed to race since the 1970s). Two years later he lost by a horse's nose.

On Apr. 24 Jason will have another chance to put the Griswold name on the trophy. The elder Griswold nearly tears up when he considers the possibility of a Griswold victory. "Oh my God," he says in an elegant drawl. "I'd get drunk for an entire week."