

Fall Grand Hunt brings best retrievers to region

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RYAN HERMENS | The Sun

Rusty Champion, amateur trainer and Abbeville, Alabama, native, and his black Labrador retriever - quaintly named Abby for her hometown - basked in the sun after she returned with one of three ducks she had to locate in the wetlands of the West Kentucky Wildlife Management Area in Kevil.

KEVIL -- Abby, a purebred black Labrador retriever from Abbeville, Alabama, heeled along the bank of a pond in the West Kentucky Wildlife Management Area -- a proud pup after quickly locating three ducks and toeing a sharp return line back to her owner.

She and her owner, Rusty Champion, had every reason to feel special Friday, as she was one of only a few hunting retrievers talented enough to make it to the final day of the 2016 Hunting Retrievers Club Fall Grand Hunt.

For the past five days, amateur and professional hunting dog owners from all over the U.S. and Canada have converged on the 6,500-acre plot in west McCracken County with hopes of earning enough points for their dog to become a "Grand Champion" purebred within the United Kennel Club (UKC).

The dogs were judged in four trials of two simulated land hunts and two simulated waterfowl hunts involving geese, duck, dove and ground-nesting birds such as pheasant, quail and grouse. If they succeeded, a fifth and final trial awaited -- where the retrievers had to flush and quarter an open field and track down a live chuckar for their owners to target.

At the beginning of the week, there were more than 350 retrievers in the five-day event. By late Friday evening, only a few would earn the marks necessary to complete "Grand Champion" status, which requires the completion of two Grand Hunts and an accumulation of 300 tournament points.

"These dogs that we're seeing are all great animals because it's the process of elimination," said Tracy Stubbs, who serves as national president of the HRC. "You started off with really good dogs, but then you see the cream rise to the top. And then you go to the uplands, and you kind of change gears from duck hunting and water fowling to an upland game.

"These are the best dogs in the United States and Canada that participate in our venue. They're bad to the bone."

Local economic impact

Finding a suitable location for such a big event isn't easy. In order to simulate multiple hunting scenarios, the HRC and UKC needed different types of landscapes to properly recreate the surroundings of bird-dog hunting.

Tim Kreher, a public lands biologist for the WMA, and HRC Fall Grand Committee Chairman Mike Botts listened in earnest as the Central Kentucky HRC made a compelling offer to host the event in McCracken County where a 6,500-acre area owned by the Department of Energy, the Tennessee Valley Authority and the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources sits ready for an event like this.

"I made a trip down here last spring and met with Tim, and we looked over everything," said Botts. "We have specific things that we are looking for, and (the WMA) had everything we were looking for and some extras."

Those extras include quick access to animal care, fuel, lodging, entertainment and food -- all things the city of Paducah has plenty of.

Other communities that have hosted the bi-annual event have estimated a financial impact in excess of \$1.5 million.

"Paducah has been a great host town," Stubbs added. "You go into these hotels and stuff up here, and there are all kinds of dog kennels. It's a pretty big economic impact when we come into a town and host a national event."

Botts, who also helped manage a Grand Hunt earlier this year in Texas City, Texas, said the week went "extremely well" and that his crew "can't wait to get back up here," but they'll have to wait for another request from the CKHRC to return.

In the meantime, Kreher has already booked the American Kennel Club's National Open Championship for November 2018 -- with a \$2-\$3 million economic impact estimated.

"That's the truly elite, top of the line contest in the retriever world," Kreher added. "It goes for seven days and culminates in 10 tests."

A man and his dogs

Scott Greer, a Dyersburg, Tennessee, native and owner of the professional training company North Forks Retrievers, said it was duck hunting that eventually led him into the retriever training world.

Now making a living in preparing dogs to be masterful hunters, Greer said it's a lot more complicated than just "buying a dog" and entering a contest to become one of the select few chosen for "Grand Champion" status.

"If you're going to run the Grand, you're going to look for a puppy whose mommy and daddy have Grand titles," he said. "You're not just going to go buy a dog. You're going to look for titled breeding, so to speak. And you don't immediately go run at this level.

The dog has to be trained. And you have to acquire the knowledge and earn your stripes."

He called it "a brutal grind," an endurance sport for both the owner and the beloved pup.

But there's a great deal of accomplishment in winning an event like this one in Kevil. It's years of training all coming together in the final, blissful moments when the last points are tallied.

And a narrow loss can motivate an owner even more.

"This is HRC's Super Bowl," he said. "You've been preparing for it, these dogs have been in training all year, and it's the agony of defeat when you don't make it and you've put every ounce of energy you've had into that dog.

"But at the same time... if it was just given to you, it wouldn't mean a whole lot."