

Retriever trials to draw 1,110 dogs, 300 people

BY MAX SILVERSON

The Star-News

More than 1,100 dogs and almost 300 handlers from across the country are set to compete for bird hunting certifications in the Master National Retriever Club competition.

The prestigious bird dog event, sanctioned by the American Kennel Club, will be hosted at several ranches in Valley County from Sept. 30 through Oct. 10.

The 1,115 dogs participating in the event are tested on their ability to retrieve dead or downed ducks to prove their ability as hunting companions.

The Master National is the largest event of its kind in the country and this year will be the largest field of dogs in the event's history.

To test the dogs' skills, judges will set up three tests. One is on land, another on water and a third combining both land and water features.

Dogs are not only tested on their ability to retrieve a duck that they saw fall, but must also complete a "blind retrieve" where the handler directs the dog to the downed bird with hand signals and whistles.

Judges set up tests in accordance with guidelines from the American Kennel Association, said Master National President Keith Winch of Paonia, Colorado.

"They'll set up a test that the dog has to pass in their judgment of a good hunting dog that they would be proud to hunt with," Winch said.

There is no first, second or third place in the competition, with dogs either passing the test or failing.

Success earns the dog and its handler a pewter plate to mark the achievement.

The vast majority of participating dogs are varieties of Labradors or retrievers, but this year's competition also includes two poodles and four spaniels. The oldest dogs are 12 years old and the youngest less than 2 years, organizers said.

There are 50 Hall of Fame retrievers entered, including two that have passed eight previous Master National tests. To qualify for the Hall of Fame, retrievers have to pass at least three events.

The 2020 event was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The event's safety protocols are strict for this year, requiring masks and breaking the competition into



Photo by Coach & Me Photography

Handler Jim Pollard of Texas receives a duck from his dog "Elvis" during the 2019 Master National retriever trials held in Cheraw, South Carolina.

seven groups to minimize the potential for an outbreak among participants.

Spectators are not encouraged to attend in order to both reduce the risk of potential COVID-19 spread and to minimize distractions for the dogs, Winch said.

Entrants come from across the country, traveling from 38 states from Alaska to Florida as well as some participants from Canada.

To qualify for the Master

National competition, dogs must complete six similar tests from one of the roughly 170 of member clubs across the country.

The 2021 Master National is hosted by the Treasure Valley Hunting Retriever Club.

The Master National was founded in 1991 in Delaware with less than 100 dogs at the inaugural event. Each year the competition is held at a different location across the country.

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Master National courses to test skills of hunting retriever dogs

*Event starts this week
at various locations
in Valley County*

BY MAX SILVERSON

The Star-News

Officials from the Master National Retriever Club set up courses the past week that will be used to test the skills of hunting retriever dogs during the group's national event that starts this week in Valley County.

The event showcases the best of the best hunting retrievers, Master National President Keith Winch of Paonia, Colorado, said.

Dogs that successfully complete the trials earn an elite certification for their hunting skills represented by a pewter plate.

The Master National is the nation's largest hunting retriever American Kennel Club event and it is being hosted in Valley County because of the work of the Treasure Valley Hunting Retriever Club. The event begins Saturday and the event concludes on Oct. 9.

Spectators are asked not to attend the event due to COVID-19 restrictions and also to limit distractions for the dogs competing in the event.

Each year the Master National chooses a different location across the country to host the event, cycling through the group's four regions.

"The properties up here just lend themselves to this type of event," said Laura Foster, who serves as the Treasure Valley club's secretary and Host Chair of the 2021 Master National event.

"Down in the Treasure



Photo by Chelsea Tuttle/For The Star-News

From left, Charlie Dodd of Poplarville, Mississippi, Jim Bauer of Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Ron Borton of Mountain Home set up a bird launcher at one of several sites around Valley County that will be used during the 2021 Master National Retriever Club event that begins this week.

Valley, we don't have as many ranching properties," Foster said.

The Treasure Valley club is a member of the American Kennel Club and one of the about 170 clubs qualified to conduct qualifying tests for the Master National event. The club has about 65 members from New Plymouth to Twin Falls, Foster said.

Pitched to Board

Hosting the event is an idea that the local club hatched in 2019 and then presented to the Master National board meeting in February 2020, Foster said.

That planning effort culminated in organizing seven test locations from Cascade to McCall on pri-

Creating realistic and fair courses for each location is no simple task. Over the past week, organizers have been setting up courses, unobtrusive staging areas and camouflaged blinds from which the judges can watch, Foster said.

The Master National includes three tests for the dogs - one on land, another on water and a third that combines land and water.

"A good venue is an area that simulates what might be seen on a normal day's hunt," Foster said.

Fourteen judges work together as teams to design the testing scenarios in accordance with guidelines developed by the American Kennel Club.

"Tests are set up with safety in mind," Foster said.

The areas are walked multiple times by judges, the safety committee and others to ensure there are no holes, wire or other hazards on the ground, she said.

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Retriever dog tests are ‘a team sport’

Handlers, dogs work in concert to earn coveted certification

BY MAX SILVERSON

The Star-News

Kailyn McKeithan and her “small but very mighty” black lab Bonnie are both participating in their first ever Master National competition this week.

McKeithan, 17, of Wilmington, North Carolina, is the only junior handler at the event, which will see over 1,000 dogs and about 300 handlers attempt to pass a series of tests to verify their hunting skills.

The Master National is the nation’s largest hunting retriever American Kennel Club event and it is being hosted in Valley County. The event began last Saturday and concludes this weekend.

“I do think it’s a team sport,” McK-eithan said. “When you and your dog are up at the line running the tests, the dog has to do its part but that dog has to have trust in you as well and you have to do your part as the han-dler.”

Some profes-sional handlers will run up to a dozen dogs or more in the event, but McKei-than has focused on Bonnie’s first visit to the Master National.

“I have always loved the out-doors and going hunting,” said McKeithan.

McKeithan has taken Bonnie out hunting and in local competitions, but she said the experience is not quite the same as staged events.

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Photo by Chelsea Tuttle/For The Star-News
Bob Neipert, 73, of Lexington, Texas, and his dog, Mary, train for the Master National retriever event held this week in Valley County.

Retrievers

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“I think running in a hunt test is a lot more complicated (than hunting),” she said.

McKeithan’s family owns and trains seven Labrador retrievers. Her sister, Haleigh, is also participating in the Master National with their dogs Slam and Michonne.

In some of the event’s tests, the dog is allowed to see where a dead bird lands, while in others only the handler can see where it lands and must direct the dog with hand signals and whistles.

The Master National is not a competition between dog handlers to see which is better. Instead, dogs participate in the event to earn a certification that shows they performed at a certain skill level.

Passing the test earns a successful dog a coveted pewter plate to mark the achievement.

Some of the best and most decorated hunting retrievers in the country came to Valley County this week.

Bob Neipert, 73, from Lexington, Texas is seeking to tie the Master National



Photo by Chelsea Tuttle/For The Star-News

Kailyn McKeithan of Wilmington, North Carolina, and her dog Bonnie use decoys to train for their upcoming test in a meadow in Donnelly on Friday.

record of nine plates with his 11-year-old retriever Mary.

Neipert also entered his dogs, Pete and Johnny, in the event. Both are working towards their first Master National plate.

Neipert got hooked on training hunting retriever dogs after joining his local retriever club and retired to

focus on it full time.

“I try not to keep track of the money; it would ruin my hobby,” he said. “We do spend a lot of time training and traveling across the nation.”

Some handlers are professional trainers and operate kennels. Attending the Master National is not just a passion but also a way



Photos by Chelsea Tuttle/For The Star-News

Joe Perron of Pineville, Louisiana, signals for his dog Drake to ‘heel up’ to return one of the retrieved ducks during his test on Sunday in Cascade.

to showcase their training programs and build their business.

“We try to make money, but if you figure out what we make per hour it’s probably \$1.50,” said Joe Perron, who runs Champion Retrievers in Pineville, Louisiana.

Perron’s business trains and breeds hunting

retrievers. He entered 13 dogs in the Master National this week and owns a total of 36 dogs.

Perron dedicates a lot of time to traveling across the country to enter similar events, putting about 11,000 miles on his truck since June.

“You gotta love the dogs to be in this sport,” he said.

“You’re with them 24/7, even at home.”

Gump, a 12-year-old retriever, has been Perron’s most successful dog. Gump is also seeking a record ninth plate at this year’s Master National.

Overall, he said he expected less than half of his dogs to pass the event’s tests.

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Best in the Business

Retrievers, handlers awarded coveted pewter plates at 2021 Master National hunting test

BY MAX SILVERSON

The Star-News

A total of 658 of the 1,035 dogs that started the 2021 Master National hunting retriever test in Valley County qualified for a coveted pewter plate to memorialize their achievement as the best hunting dogs in the business.

The Master National Retriever Club wrapped up its weeklong test of hunting dogs from across the country on Sunday.

In the event, dogs were required to retrieve dead or downed ducks to prove their hunting ability as judged against a set standard of performance.

Master National President Keith Winch said that being able to showcase the dogs after canceling the 2020 event due to COVID-19 was a success.

This year's social events were canceled due to COVID-19 worries.

"It was a disappointment to most, but understood due to keeping our constituents safe," said Winch, of Paonia, Colorado.

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Photo for The Star-News by Chelsea Tuttle

Joe Perron of Pineville, Louisiana, and his 12-year-old retriever Gump received a record tying ninth pewter plate during last weekend's award ceremonies for the 2021 Master National.

Retrievers

(Continued from Page 1)

This year's event, which was hosted at sites across Valley County, set several records including the most dogs to enter at 1,115, most to start and most to qualify. About 300 handlers participated in the event.

Two dogs tied the all-time record of nine plates. They were Bob Neipert of Lexington,

Texas, and his dog Mary, and Joe Perron of Pineville, Louisiana and his dog Gump.

Only five dogs have now accomplished this feat, including Mary and Gump, event secretary Frank Barton said.

Junior handler Kailyn McKeithan and her dog Bonnie also earned their first plate.

"The scenic backdrop of Valley County, Idaho was just breathtaking all week," Barton said. "It was a common comment I heard multiple times."

"The conditions were extremely challenging especially for a large number of dogs that have never seen this type of terrain," he said. "Most of us run on ground that is very flat."

The weather was mostly sunny during the event but

a brief snowstorm made the event difficult for some.

"The day it snowed was a bit of a shock to the folks from the South," Winch said.

Most dogs in the contest were Labradors or retrievers, but the competition also included poodles and spaniels. The oldest dogs were 12 years old and the youngest less than two.

Organizers said they were grateful for the hospitality of landowners, local businesses and people they met along the way.

Entrants came from across the country, traveling from 38 states from Alaska to Florida as well as some participants from Canada.

To qualify for the Master National competition, dogs were required to complete six similar tests from one of the roughly 170 of member clubs across the country.

The 2021 Master National was hosted by the Treasure Valley Hunting Retriever Club.

The Master National was founded in 1991 in Delaware with less than 100 dogs at the inaugural event. Each year the competition is held at a different location across the country.

Next year the Master National will be held in Tri-Cities, Washington.

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