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CENTER OF ATTENTION

THE LINE OF trucks and dog trailers starts near the intersection of two gravel roads and stretches a good quarter-mile back toward the turnoff from Boldry School Road. The sun has burned off a stubborn morning fog. The temperature and humidity follow as it climbs higher into the cloudless sky.

A thirty-something from Sylvania, Georgia, with a three-day beard and sun-bleached hair flowing from the back of his camouflage hat, settles into a lawn chair beside his rig to offer his view of it all.

“In my opinion, and I’m not at all ashamed to say it, this is the premier hunt test in the country,” Stephen Durrence says.

Durrence was headed to medical school before he discovered a passion and talent for training champion hunting retrievers. The fork in his life’s road is what has brought him here to West Kentucky Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in McCracken County.

The Hunting Retriever Club conducted its Fall 2016 International Grand on the management area in late September. The event drew 366 champion hunting retrievers and their handlers. Dogs were judged on their ability to excel under simulated hunting conditions.

Durrence’s Taylor Farm Kennels brought 12 dogs.

“This is my first time here,” he said. “Beautiful country. Wonderful. It’s easily accessible. It’s a jewel right here in the middle of the country.”

West Kentucky WMA has a good reputation among field trialers. Part of what makes it an attractive destination is the variety found on its 6,425 acres. Its location about 15 minutes outside of Paducah doesn’t hurt, either.

The area hosts more than a dozen field

West Kentucky WMA welcomes international field trials

By Kevin Kelly



KEVIN KELLY PHOTO

trials each year. One of those – the Quail Championship Invitational – is considered one of the most renowned bird dog events in the nation. The Hunting Retriever Club’s Fall International Grand hunt test and the scheduling of the National Retriever Championship in 2018 are raising the management area’s profile even more.

“Either one of these events could go any place they want to,” said Tim Kreher, a public lands biologist with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources who works on the WMA. “It’s pretty prestigious for the host area.”

The Hunting Retriever Club, an affiliate of the United Kennel Club, had not held an International Grand in Kentucky. West Kentucky WMA emerged as a potential host site when the Central Kentucky Hunting Retriever Association pitched the idea to Hunting Retriever Club officials.

“I got in my truck and came down here,” said Mike Botts, Hunting Retriever Club vice president and member of its Grand Hunt Committee. “(Central Kentucky Association president) Tim Bach and Tim Kreher took me on a tour, showed me what was available. It was pretty much a no-brainer. These grounds are so good for what we need.”

The WMA is about a 45-minute drive from the village of Dongola, Illinois. That’s where Mitch Patterson lives. He is vice president of the National Retriever Club and will be its president by the time the National Retriever Championship comes to town in November 2018.

To host an event of its caliber, an area must have good grounds and water, but also have the ability to accommodate hundreds of people. Patterson loves the location.

“There’s a variety of reasons why I decided I wanted to bring it there,” he said. “A huge reason is the cooperation that we have gotten from Tim and his bosses all the way up the chain at Kentucky Fish and Wildlife that have agreed to work with us to bring this event there. It’s a rather big undertaking. I’ve been working on it for 12 years. In those years, Tim has worked as much as he can to make improvements and to make some really nice grounds to bring the national championship to.”

The National Retriever Championship has been held annually since 1941 and draws the top 100 or so dogs in the United States



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Dogs were tasked with flushing and retrieving pen-raised chukar during the upland hunt test at the Fall 2016 International Grand at West Kentucky WMA.

“Paducah is personal,” said Fowler Black, group sales director with the Paducah Convention and Visitors Bureau. “It’s a place that you can get to know not only through its people but through its landscape and through its creative environment.”

Officials from Black’s organization have already met with Kreher and Patterson to discuss the needs and wants for the National Retriever Championship.

“Part of the services that we provide is we work with them to help uncover and see all the resources that we can bring to bear here,” said Becky Straley, director of convention sales. “We serve as a sort of concierge to make the connections with the providers of all those services that they will need and help them build agreements for things they will need.”

She added: “We’ll be helping them take the vision that they have in their mind for their event and really pairing up all the wonderful opportunities we have here to meet and exceed their expectations.”

Planning for the International Grand at West Kentucky WMA started in 2014. The event planning work ranged from lining up hotels to prepping the test sites.

Management area staff drained shallow wetlands over the summer to encourage new growth before flooding them again. Fields were groomed in early September to provide realistic dry land waterfowl and upland bird hunting scenarios.

“We had to do a little bit of extra stuff but not anything way out of the ordinary,” Kreher said. “We try to provide a variety of different types of habitat and different sites.”

“All of these big events have some requirements. One of the things the International Grand wanted was some waterbodies where they could still do a realistic test but because of time constraints couldn’t have dogs swimming a lot,” he said. “We have some of those wetlands where we can either put water in or take water out, so we were able to provide for that. A lot of that stuff goes hand in hand when you manage for a diversity of habitat for different wildlife species.”

Students from Scott Cronin’s wildlife management program at Muhlenberg

and Canada, Patterson said. Retrievers must meet certain qualifying guidelines in American Kennel Club-licensed trials to earn an invitation. The event showcases a dog’s retrieving abilities through a series of land and water tests.

“There’s only one national field championship each year.” Patterson said. “It’s the highest honor of the sport.”

The size and scope of the International Grand was eye-opening for local tourism officials. Botts said studies have shown the impact of hosting the International Grand

Handlers meet with judges before the upland hunt test to discuss procedures for the test.

exceeds \$1 million.

“We do as much business locally as we can,” he said. “For example, we tried to have all of our event programs printed here (in Paducah). We had all the award plaques made here. We try to plow as much money back into the local economy as we can.”

Visitors for these events occupy hotel rooms, eat at local restaurants and shop at area retail stores. In that respect, Paducah offers all the creature comforts as well as a vibrant arts scene and some of the best barbecue on the planet.

A multi-day event like the International Grand or the National Retriever Championship provides the city an opportunity to showcase itself to a new audience.



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County High School worked as bird technicians throughout the event. The group received \$1,000 per day for its work, which mostly entailed tending to the bird launchers at the four test sites. The program will use the funds on forestry and wildlife-related projects, Cronin said.

Cronin grew up in Oldham County and is a friend of Tim Wakefield, who is vice president of the Central Kentucky Hunting Retriever Association.

"It's kind of like the Super Bowl of the hunting retrieving world, only it happens twice a year instead of once a year," Wakefield said. "We were fortunate to have the grounds like we have here at West Kentucky Wildlife Management Area to pull it off. That's probably the toughest thing: the logistics of being able to bring that many trucks, that many dogs, and being able to park them and have motels to take care of them and have good grounds that will be challenging to the dogs."

Wakefield had an International Grand entry, but his retriever didn't advance past the first day. He already has his eye on try-

A dog swims out to retrieve a duck while judges look on at the Avery water test site during the Fall 2016 International Grand at West Kentucky WMA.

ing again in the future.

"I get up in the morning and train dogs for an hour or so and get ready to do this stuff," he said. "Doing it myself, it took me five years to get to this point. He just missed one mark by that much and that put him out. I think he's more than capable.

"Now, I have a better idea of what to train for. When I was coming off the line, I said I'll never do this again. Now I'm thinking about Alabama in the spring."

Fewer than half of the dogs entered in the International Grand passed all five tests. A fraction of those earned the title of Grand Hunting Retriever Champion, a title bestowed after a dog earns enough points.

Eleven of Durrence's 12 dogs passed every test. Six earned the title of Grand Hunting Retriever Champion, including a 10-year-old black Labrador retriever named Dude.

Dude owns a record 15 Grand passes.

"When you pass it that many times, you take luck out of the equation," Durrence said. "It doesn't get easier. They don't hand them out. He just stayed focused on doing this and being good for that long. I feel the other things that he's been successful at are a direct result of being trained so diligently for this."

After the event, Durrence and his retrievers stayed in Kentucky to train before leaving for St. Louis and the Master National Retriever Club's Master National.

"In the cooler months this is the perfect place if you're traveling across the country. Stop and spend a few days here," he said. "Everybody's been super nice. I've had nothing but positive experiences. I think we should start utilizing it more."

The thought had crossed Botts' mind already. At a welcome banquet the night before, he raised the possibility to Bach.

"Before we even get started, I want to ask you one question," Botts said. "What year do you guys think you might want to have it again?" ■