A Grand Opportunity

It's not your usual dog-eat-dog world. In the Hunting Retriever Club, trainers cheer each other on.

Story and Photos
By Kathy Andrews

They proclaim themselves to be "The fun place to test your dog in realistic hunting tests."

The realistic, ability-based tests include five days of water and land retrieves simulating waterfowl and upland hunting scenarios. Fail to pass one test and the dog doesn't proceed to the next stage.

After years of training and testing—advancing through the Hunting Retriever Club ranks from Started to Seasoned, Finished, Grand and Upland ratings—the dogs are put to their ultimate test: The respected title of Grand Hunting Retriever Champion, a title fewer than 400 dogs have earned.

A starting field of nearly 350 dogs was registered for the fall 2008 International Grand Hunt, hosted by the Mississippi Valley Hunting Retriever Club and conducted in the Quad-Cities area. On the day of the final test, a mere 60 dogs remained in the running.

Hunter Retriever Club competitions judge dogs solely on their performance.

Sporting events typically bring forth fierce competition. But in the retriever

Hunting retriever trainers support each other in training and competitions because the dogs don't compete against each other.

Earning the Grand Hunting Retriever Champion title requires passing realistic, ability-based upland game retrieves.

dog competition, no ribbons are awarded. There's no grand display of shiny trophies waiting to be picked up. This is a pass/fail test and each dog is judged solely on their performance. In the gallery, handlers and interested spectators actually root for each dog to do its best.

"In this sport you compete against yourself and the HRC standards," explained Chris Aiken, owner of one of the nation's largest retriever training operations and trainer of more than 100 Grand Champions. "Events take place from February to November, and because of the non-competitive structure and fact we're together so much—Aiken estimates he spends four weekends at home during the season—a tremendous fellowship develops between the trainers."

Formed in 1984, HRC draws upon more than a century of tradition through its affiliation with the United Kennel Club, Inc., established in 1898 and the second-largest dog registry in the United States.

Like all young, and successful, organizations, HRC keeps increasing.

"The organization has grown a lot in the last 20 years," Aiken remarked. "I'd say that 99 percent of the improvement we've seen is a result of the Internet. Because we don't compete against each other there is a tremendous willingness to share information that helps produce better dogs."

Dogs that prove themselves on the field. If it isn't their day, their actions will take them out of the competition—and back to training in preparation for the next championship.

For information on clubs and a schedule of tests, visit huntingretrieverclub.org.

The International Grand Hunt was hosted by the Mississippi Valley HRC and supported by Purina/Pro Plan, Tri-tronics, Avery, K9 Advantix, Ainley, American Industrial Door Company, Barn Ridge Kennels, DeWitt Pet Hospital, P.C., Montauk Chesapeakes, HyVee, 1st Farm Credit Services, Devils Glen Barber Shop, John Deere, River Stone, Mills Chevrolet and GM.