

# Competition brings men, dogs together

By Kathryn Burke

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Two men and a dog enter into a battle against time and nature on the open prairies in a new type of competitive hunting.

The competition is a simulated bird hunt where two hunters and one dog go into a field to find and shoot as many birds as they can in 30 minutes.

Rex Murray, a farmer and rancher north of Goodland, is an expert in the sport and a regional director of Upland Classic, a national group that holds competitions. He is a dog trainer, Vizsla dog breeder and owner of Ringneck Country, a hunting reserve where he and his hunting partner, Eddie Anderson, simulate the hunt all year to practice for competitions.

For a morning practice, Murray takes his pickup, pulling a trailer with room for the dogs, clothes, guns, water, food and more. On the dashboard, a power bar for dogs sits right next to the human snacks he keeps on hand.

The men head out to an inconspicuous area on the hunting reserve. As you crest the hill, it looks like an ordinary stretch of land with tall prairie grass.

In the middle of the open ground, the dirt road leading to the hunting spot ends near a larger tractor and a small structure used as a cage for quail.

Murray climbs out of the pickup and lets several quail out of an outdoor cage filled with the birds. The quail fly away and the hunters consider the wind before they start the chase.

When they are in a competition, Murray said, organizers drop six



birds, two quail, two pheasants and two chukkers, in the middle of a field while hunters and dogs can't see the area.

"It simulates wild bird hunting as close as you can," said Anderson.

In practice, even before they are let out of the kennels, the dogs start to whine and bark in anticipation of the hunt.

"This is what they want to do," said Anderson's wife, Terri.

Teaming with adrenaline, the

dogs have to be held back as Anderson and Murray fit them with electronic collars.

Murray said they use the collars and voice calls to stop the dogs from running out of control through the field.

He said the dogs work regardless of the weather, but he keeps doggy boots and vests on hand to protect them in certain conditions at contests.

After the dogs are fitted, they are let out into the field to find the birds.



Eddie Anderson (left) made sure his dog Pepsi got a cool drink after she practiced a hunt. Anderson followed behind the dogs as they sniffed out birds in a field on Rex Murray's property.

Photos by Kathryn Burke/The Goodland Star-News

Running with excitement, the dogs start downwind of the birds and sniff them out.

Anderson said a big part of success is understanding the playing field. He said the weather, especially the wind, the lay of the land and other factors can add up to a good hunt.

He said relying on the dog's sense of smell is important, too.

"Follow the dog," he said. "Listen to the dog."

In their two years together, he said, the team has kept adjusting their way of hunting to up the odds of getting the best shot.

"You have to trust your partner," he said.

"It's a competition just like anything else," said Murray, adding that both hunters have to be pretty

in tune with each other.

When the dogs find their targets, they freeze and point at the prey until the hunter notices. When a dog points, it become rigid and elongates its body, raising a foreleg, ducking its head down and sticking its tail straight up in the air.

The minute the bird is flushed, the dog takes off after it.

Because it's just practice, the hunters hold their fire, but the dogs search the area as though it's the real deal.

Anderson said the small quail, a bird that could easily fit cupped in his hands, is a harder target to hit, which makes the game more competitive.

Although the men tout the dogs' successes, the hunters are half the team.

Murray said you can't win if you

don't shoot the birds. He still gives Anderson a hard time about missing a bird a nationals, but both men take the sport lightly.

"He missed the bird that would have let my dog win," Murray said, adding that he'd quit if it got too serious. "It's a lot of fun."

When a bird is shot, the dog retrieves it and the process starts over again.

Murray said they want to fire only one shot to kill each bird, because they get an extra 10 points when they don't use all of the 10 allotted shotgun shells to kill the birds.

"You've got to do it fast and not shoot any more than you have to," Murray said.

Competitions are timed, with teams given only 30 minutes to shoot as many birds as they can. Finishing faster is worth more points, too.

Every aspect of the sport is scored, from the speed of the dogs and shooting the birds to retrieval. Murray said there are a lot of variables.

The scores end up somewhere in the mid 300s.

"Anything over 350 would be considered a fair score," he said.

After the hunt, practice or not, the dogs are loaded back into the truck and the two men drive back to civilization.

Murray and Anderson said they love the sport, and even if they didn't win, they would keep going back.

"We go out there No. 1 to have fun," Murray said. "We don't go with intentions of winning. We go to watch the dogs, see the dogs. I see people I haven't seen since last year, too."

## Dogs train on reserve

A love of dogs, hunting and the outdoors drew Rex Murray, a farmer and rancher north of town, to the sport of tournament hunting.

Murray is now a dog trainer, Vizsla dog breeder, expert in the sport and the owner of the Ringneck Country hunting reserve.

He is into competitive hunting and has been a member of the Upland Classic group since its inception five years ago.

In competition, two men who go out into a field with one dog to simulate hunting. The dog sniffs out birds, points their position and retrieves after the hunter shoots them. The sport is scored on time, number of shots fired and bird dog and hunter performance.

Murray got into the sport after breeding and training bird dogs on his ranch. He trained Pepsi, the first-place award winner in the big national competition, the Upland Classic finals in Lawrence County, Mo. Pepsi belongs to his hunting partner, Eddie Anderson.

Ringneck Country is a state-licensed controlled shooting area featuring over 7,900 acres of upland game hunting. Murray said hunters can go after native birds or participate in controlled hunts.

The reserve features pheasant, quail and chucker. He said they mow the fields and plant feed to make sure the birds have a good habitat.

Murray said they allow hunters to shoot prairie dogs on the property, too. "We've been in the hunting-reserve business for 15 years," he said, adding that he got into that because he loves to hunt.

He uses the reserve to train bird dogs, a "hobby" that he spends about six hours a day on.



Murray

"He's a dog whisperer," said his wife Sandi. "(He's) got a knack."

Murray uses electric collars and whistles while training the dogs. He mostly works with pointing dogs, which find a bird and stand still for at least three seconds before flushing it for the hunter to shoot.

He not only trains dogs for competition, but for private hunters. Most of the dogs he works with, he said, will be sent back to their owners and taken out only during hunting season.

Pepsi, a liver-colored German shorthair, spent several months training to be an award-winning bird dog with Murray.

He said any dog can be a good bird dog, regardless of breed. The Vizslas he breeds are his favorites, though.

"We own nine," Sandi said.

Rex said Vizsla dogs are Hungarian and sometimes referred to as Hungarian pointer dog. They were

first imported to the U.S. in the 1950s and admitted to the American Kennel Club in 1960.

He said Vizslas are even tempered and good with kids.

"They make very good family pets," he said.

Vizslas are a versatile bird dog, he said, and they will point and retrieve. Murray said the dogs have short rust-colored coats that contain no black. Some dogs, he said, have white on their chests and toes.

He said the dogs he trains have to be worked regularly after they go home or they lose some of what they gain from the training.

Anderson works with Murray often, taking tour groups out on the reserve and working with the dogs.

"The dogs are as comfortable with me as they are with him," Anderson said.

With business mixing in with his hobby, Murray said, he loves his work.

For Upland Classic events, he travels around the country giving the dogs practice in the field.

He travels as far away as Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska to attend competitions and deliver dogs he has trained.

"I travel about 15,000 to 20,000 miles per year," he said adding he is planning a trip to North Carolina this month.

Murray says he has gotten calls from people who see his phone number painted on his truck or trailer while he's out a competitions.

The Murrys hold three competitions at their place every year. Although Murray doesn't participate in his own runs, he said, the event is fun.

"The biggest thing people need to know with these tournaments," he said, "is you don't have to have a great dog (to compete)."

## Pepsi the dog wins top spot

By Kathryn Burke

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A dark chocolate hunting dog greets visitors to her home with a wagging tail and a loving personality from the short fence in the back yard at 608 Main.

Pepsi may look like an ordinary animal, chewing a bone and bounding around the yard, but she is a champion bird dog.

Pepsi, a 3-year-old liver-colored German shorthair dog, won the top prize last month in a national hunting competition, the Upland Classic Series finals, in Lawrence County, Mo.

The dog's owner, Eddie Anderson, is an avid competitor in tournament hunting, a sport where two hunters and a dog go into a field to find and shoot as many birds as they can in a set amount of time.

He got into the sport when his partner Rex Murray, a farmer and rancher who lives near the Sherman-Cheyenne County border, asked Anderson to join him in competition in the fall of 2002 when his regular partner couldn't make it. Anderson said he was hooked from then on.

Pepsi became a part of the Anderson family after his daughter Adriel moved away to college, and his wife Terri brought him a surprise.

"He said he didn't want her at first," Terri recalled, adding that the next day he had taken the dog to Murray.

Pepsi spent the next couple of months learning how to be a bird dog, Murray said.

"We've worked with her for two years," he said. "It's every-day work."

Although she has gone through some tough training, Terri said, Pepsi is a pet and pretty much has the run of the house.

"She's a spoiled rotten dog," she said.

The team went to eight qualifying events before making it to nationals this year. They took four dogs to enter 18 rounds of competition for Murray and nine for Anderson in the four-day contest.

Along with winning first place with Pepsi, they

took second with Mac, a 6-year-old Vizsla, and Murray took fifth in a single hunter competition with Rudy, a 2-year-old Vizsla. Rudy won first place at the competition for her placings throughout the year.

In the national competition, Pepsi scored 779 points overall, just one point higher than Murray's dog Mac with 778 points.

The team event started with a first run, and winners moved on to the second.

In the qualifying round, Pepsi got 374 and Mac got 404. In the finals, Pepsi got 405 and Mac 374.

"We did not let a bird fly away all weekend," Murray said.

In their two years together, he said, the team keeps adjusting their way of hunting to up the odds of getting the best shot.

"You have to trust your partner," Anderson said. "I know what he's going to do and he knows what I'm going to do. You've got to work together. It's a team event."

"They're great partners," added Murray's wife Sandi.

Anderson and Murray said they both grew up hunting and love the sport, but they say the competitions are mostly about the dog work.

They travel with a large trailer that hold both men's luggage, the dogs, dog food, water and other necessities.

Terri has been to several events to see her husband and dog compete. She said Pepsi loves the hunt.

Although today she is an award winning dog, Anderson said she will continue to compete.

Pepsi and Anderson already have another first-place national award, from the North American Gun Dog Association on Saturday, April 2. They shared the honor in the doubles event — two dogs, two hunters — with Mike Leitner, Atwood, and his dog Sese.

"Pepsi now holds two national titles," said Terri.

She said Larry House and his dog Rowdy won second place in open pointing in the competition and his son Casey took fourth in youth pointing with the same dog.

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