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Denny

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be. Oh, sure, Denny looked as if he had some fire in those beady black eyes. His orange bill gleamed as brightly as any other duck's. His majestic green-feathered head and jet black wings had an air of excellence about them.

We didn't even know what kind of duck it was; more importantly, we didn't care.

He had a bill, webbed feet and quacked — in our ignorant minds, he would do just fine.

And when we looked at the competition, our confidence in Denny was given a slight boost.

There were plenty of ugly ducks out there. Ducks with twisted faces and narrow bills. Their faded and tattered wings looked like the remnants of a torn trailer-park couch.

These poor excuses for waterfowl couldn't possibly overtake our fine specimen, could they?

But for some additional confidence, we turned to none other than the two-time, defending Quack-Off champion, Tim Blythe of Lincoln.

Before the race, Blythe recommended a training table that consisted of Andre Cold Duck Champagne and, chillingly enough, last year's Quack-Off losers.

We took Blythe's advice to heart, if not to our stomachs, and stood waiting for our mentor to take the track and show us how it was done.

A few short minutes later, Blythe was disqualified for not fully clipping the wings of his young duckling (a rule of which he was well aware).

Quack-off

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handlers, the farmer is paid with beer.

Just a glance at the enthusiastic crowd would indicate that beer may, in fact, play a big part in the festivities.

As the ducks were plucked one by one from their cozy trailer and placed onto the icy surface of the Webb Foot Raceway, there was a definite sense of friendly hysteria in the air.

When the starting whistle finally blew, that hysteria culminated in a hail



The thrill of victory is shared by a duck jockey and his rent-a-duck in the 16th annual Avoca Quack-Off.

Jay Calderon/DN

But we brushed our tears of disbelief aside and set ourselves to the task at hand. Our desire to win was stronger than ever.

As Denny sat poised at the edge of the track, our hearts swelled with pride.

We were no longer just newspaper reporters, we were duck racers. And, God willing, we would be champions.

But, as we said before, it wasn't meant to be. Denny let our faith slide off him like water off a ... well, you know.

Halfway down the track, Denny decided that he wasn't meant to be a racer. He sat down. He didn't budge — not one muscle. As quickly as the race had begun, it was over.

We had lost, and we left Avoca without the coveted prize money. But we'll be back next year — a little wiser to the ways of competitive duck racing and without a reporter's notebook and camera holding us back.

Watch out, Avoca. You haven't seen the last of us yet.

of feathers, a roar of approval and a gang of four or five "duck jockeys" clapping their hands, hooting, hollering and doing whatever they could to literally scare their ducks across the finish line.

But even the wildest and most inebriated of fans eventually succumbed to the tension of what was developing here.

Somebody had to win.

And, after two hours of racing, that winner was Sheryl Matthes of Lincoln. Along with her rent-a-duck, "Dude," she earned not only the \$100

prize money, but also the honor, praise and pride that accompany the Quack-Off title.

"It feels wonderful," said Matthes, who was all smiles, soon after the race's completion.

While the duck enthusiasts headed for Town Hall to continue the celebration, the ducks stayed in their trailer to think a little — to evaluate their performances Saturday, both the good and the bad.

For them, as long as there is winter, beer and ducks, there will be a day to play.

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Marimba takes center stage

By Patrick Hambrecht
Music Critic

Makoto Nakura ended his Saturday night marimba concert with wild applause, a standing ovation and a moving encore performance of "Ave Maria."



Throughout the show, Nakura wowed audiences at Kimball Hall with both his dazzling speed and boyish charm, showcased effectively in Philip Armstrong's "Gaiian Pulse" and Johann Sebastian Bach's "Sonata No. 1 in G minor."

Perhaps the highlight of the evening, "Gaiian Pulse" exhibited Nakura playing with a sequenced computer tape. The performer described the song earlier by saying he, "competes with the tape."

This rivalry paired the primitive sound of the

marimba's clanging wood against overpowering and ominous electronic chirping and whooshing roars, as though he were playing in a digital airplane hanger. It was plain that Nakura was hammering out the natural beat of Gaia, the Greek goddess of the earth, against the imposing irregularity of technology, but no clear winner could be detected.

In both "Gaiian Pulse" and "Sonata No. 1," Nakura used the easy rhythm of the percussion instrument for an interesting effect, and then combined it with a delightful, dramatic sense of melody.

This Japanese performer is a strong advocate for returning the marimba to a solo instrument, as it was better known early in the 1920s and 1930s.

In that, he championed the instrument beautifully, showing its versatile assets with the regal works of Bach, the sentimental Irish song "The Last Rose of Summer" and the cheerful sensuality of "Reflections on 'The Nature of Water'" by Jacob Druckman.

'Sesame' magic shines again

By Brian Priesman
Theater Critic

Bob Dole would have been proud. Family values were everywhere Friday night at Pershing Auditorium as hundreds of families braved the winter weather to see their favorite "Sesame Street" friends sing and dance just for them.



For almost two hours, Big Bird, Grover, Bert, Ernie, Elmo, Oscar, the Count and more sang and danced about how wonderful school was.

The story concerned an imaginary school with Professor Grover as the teacher who wanted to show everyone his favorite subject: Show and tell. Big Bird, however, didn't have anything to

show, so he kept stalling by having Grover teach other subjects.

The show, which was brought to Lincoln by the letters "Q" and "U," was filled with songs for all ages. The Count, along with Bert and Ernie, did a wonderful "Blues Brothers" impression as he sang about the joy of numbers. Bert sang about his unusual "Old MacDonald's Farm."

The star of the show was Big Bird, who kept trying to decide what to bring to show and tell. It was touching to watch him struggle with difficult decisions.

In the end, Big Bird decided that his friends were the most important thing he had and that was what he wanted to bring to show and tell — his friends.

All in all, this year's "Sesame Street Live" was a hit, as children of all ages sang and danced their way home.

