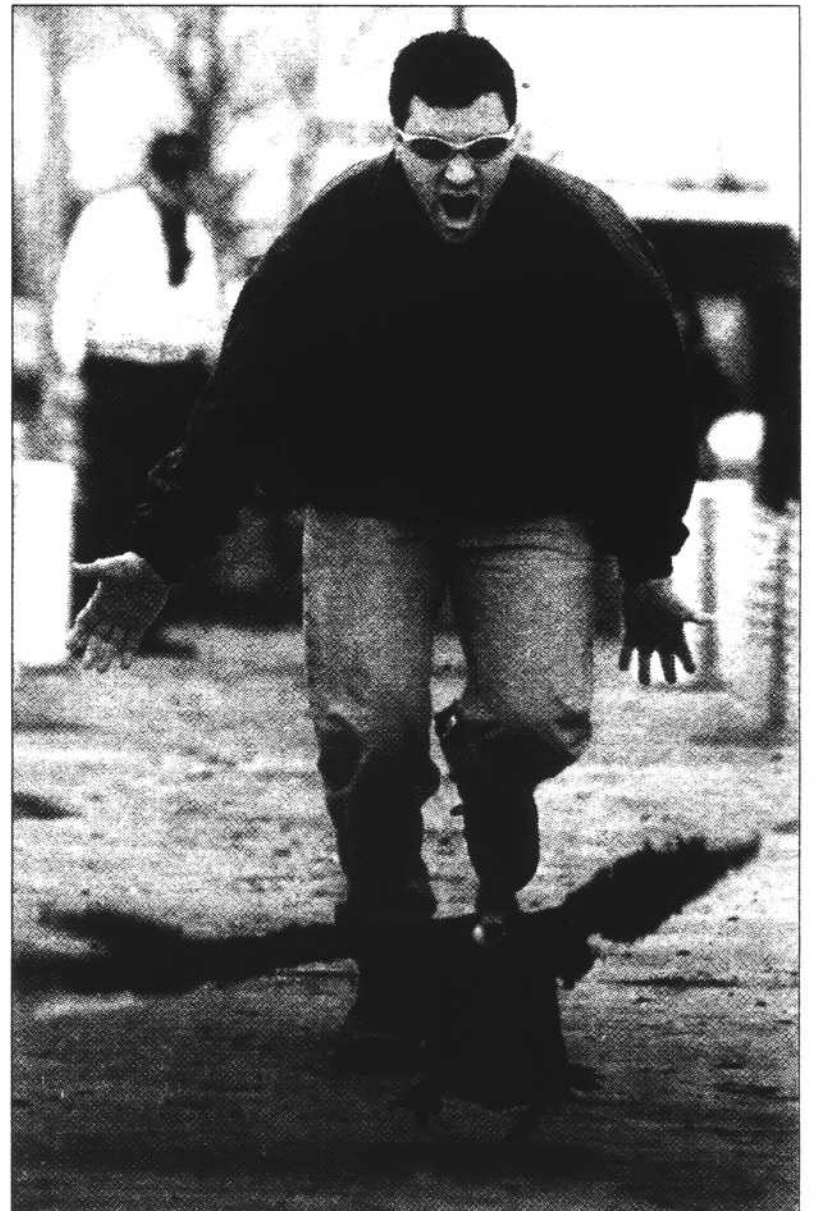
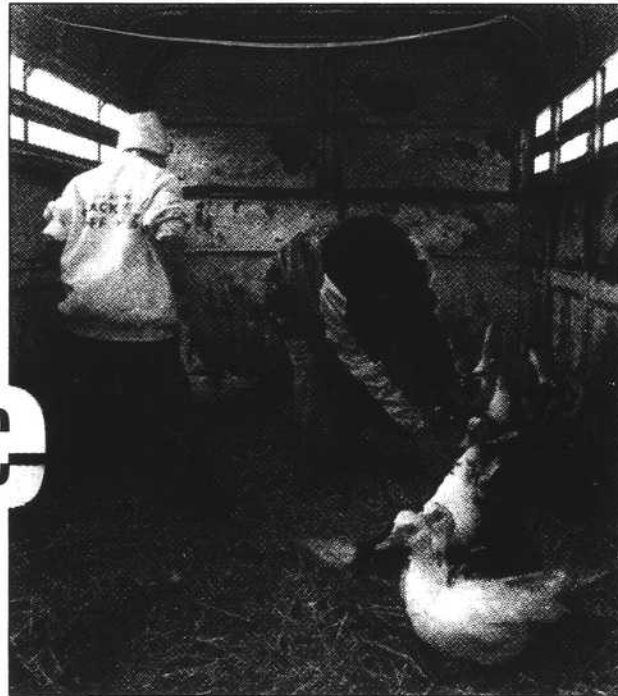
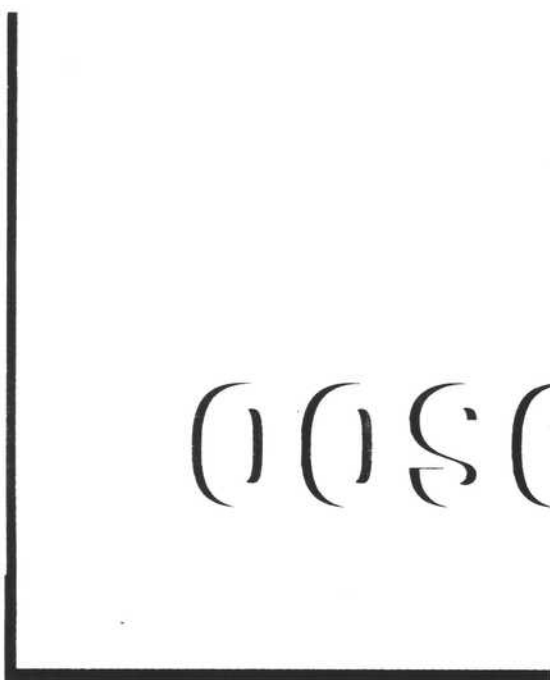




RYAN SODERLIN/DN
LEFT: KURT WILLIAMS and John Spatz, both of Lincoln, chase after Spatz's duck, which escaped from him before the racing started.

RYAN SODERLIN/DN
BELOW RIGHT: TOM KUHN, a senior history major at UNL, urges his duck, Shovelhead, toward the finish line. Kuhn's duck won its first three races, but was beaten out in the fourth round.

RYAN SODERLIN/DN
BELOW RIGHT (FROM LEFT): TIM MERWALD of Bellevue and Eric White of Omaha pick out their ducks before the Avoca Quackoff.



Ducks quack way into racers' hearts

By JASON HARDY
 Assignment Reporter

AVOCA - At first glance, it seemed like any other small Nebraska town.

There is one main street; it's paved but is more or less covered in gravel. There's a bar you can rent videos at and a post office. The view beyond the town is comprised of large trees with grain bins and garages scattered here and there.

Avoca's defining characteristic stands proud at the head of main street, overlooking the usually sleepy village. It is a town hall with a large sign that reads "Quackoff Headquarters."

The 18th annual Avoca Quackoff, a yearly outdoor duck racing festival, began Saturday with duck rental and registration at 10 a.m. in the Quackoff Headquarters. The Avoca Schoolhouse Orchestra supplied sounds of Pachelbel's Canon. Meanwhile, the crowd consumed ducky dogs and Bud Light as they mingled about, hungry for the day's races.

As 1 p.m. neared, most people were found milling around the town tennis courts, otherwise known as the Webbed Foot Raceway. Though the air was chilly and the sky was gloomy, not a sad face was seen.

The relatively balmy weather made for a dry raceway, as opposed to the traditionally icy track; but that didn't seem to matter. Veteran racers and newcomers alike were giddy with excitement and drunkenness as the announcer called the first heat of ducks over the loud

speaker.

Ducks with names like Quacker Jack, Duck O' War, Duck Force One and Weeduckyduck took their spots as racers took deep breaths. The crowd cheered with deafening force as the race official raised his hand. The whistle blew and off they went.

A year's worth of anticipation cumulated with the sound of that whistle, and the energy of the crowd skyrocketed to a frenzied level.

For many die-hard racers, most of whom were wearing large, fuzzy hats, these races symbolized what it was to be an American.

As the day progressed, ducks won and lost, but one thing remained: the excited faces of both the winners and losers. It didn't matter whose duck crossed the finish line first, all that mattered was having a good time.

Tony Kemna, a Lincoln resident who has been racing ducks for years, said he couldn't get enough of the festival.

"It's a bunch of fun," Kemna said. "I never have won, but it doesn't make any difference at all."

Bob Ruffner, racing fanatic of 10 years, agreed with Kemna.

"It's just a ball," Ruffner said. "After all, Nebraska football is over so we gotta have something to do."

The races continued throughout the afternoon, and ducks like Shovelhead, George III and Muffy the Wonderduck were eliminated despite valiant efforts. In the end, there could be only one winner, and Lincoln resident Bill Myer was the lucky \$100 duck champ.

This year's races featured a

record-setting 130 ducks. Verne Dettmer, one of the Quackoff's founding fathers, said he always knew it had that kind of potential.

"I figured it would get pretty big," Dettmer said.

He said the Quackoff hadn't always been as big as it was this year. In fact, the first race only featured three ducks. Each year the Quackoff grows and raises more money for the Avoca volunteer fire department. Dettmer said it was great to be a part of something so successful.

"It makes me feel very proud," Dettmer said.

After the races, the party atmosphere continued with a dance at the Quackoff headquarters, where Meatloaf and Chumbawamba reigned supreme.

People celebrated the coming and going of another Quackoff by singing, dancing and making beer-can pyramids. In the end, everybody won.

David Seay, public relations officer for the Avoca volunteer fire department, said he was already thinking about the future.

"In the year 2000 it will be the 20th Quackoff, so we're trying to think of some ways to enhance it for that," Seay said.

Roger Carroll has only been racing ducks for the past three years. But enhanced or not, he said, he'd probably be at the Quackoff in 2000.

"I don't know where I'll be or what I'll be doing, but if the opportunity presents itself, I plan to kick off the 21st century racing ducks."



LANE HICKENBOTTOM/DN
JOHN SPATZ, a UNL law graduate student, gets his hat returned to him after his duck lost during the semifinals of the 18th annual Avoca Quackoff.