

A Yearly duck event offers quirky fun flurry of fowl



By Michelle Starr

Staff writer

There's nothing like drinking some beer and racing ducks with friends — at least that was the idea behind the annual Quack-Off that began 20 years ago in Avoca.

"I was in a drunk state, and it was somethin' to do," said Vern Dettmer, one of four Quack-Off founders. "We were all sitting around trying to find something to do in the winter, so we thought about runnin' ducks."

The little town of 254, located about 30 miles east of Lincoln, doubles in size once a year, on the last Saturday in January.

People flock in on charter buses, school buses, the P.O. Pears bus and even a limousine. They came carrying full coolers, brainstorming names for racing ducks.

"We had friends that said we had to come, so we came," said Terry Mylander of North Bend. "It's kinda like a football Saturday without the football."

It was Mylander's first year at the Quack-Off, and he said he was having a blast.

Almost anything goes: stomping, clapping, jumping, yelling — except touching the duck — to get the duck down the iced-down basketball court first.

The Avoca Volunteer Fire Department sponsors the event, which is its largest fund-raiser.

The dedication to the event was impressive.

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Terry Mylander
spectator

Connie Cornican of Omaha was at the event ready to race her duck, Dixie. Cornican lost her toes and parts of her fingers during a hospital stay ending in mid-October.

It was her sixth year racing ducks. Cornican said her husband, Bill, introduced her to Quack-Off when they began dating.

The Quack-Off was part of her motivation for getting out of the hospital and recovering, she said.

Mike Bose, another of the four Quack-Off founders from Avoca, said one year the wind chill was 50 below zero, and people still came to race their ducks.

They covered the basketball court in cardboard and participants waited in their cars until it was time to chase their ducks down the lane, he said. He couldn't remember the year, but he said about 85 participants raced ducks.

Though the dedication is there, the competition is all taken in good fun.

Kerry Crosby of Lincoln did not get a duck this, his third year, but his children did.

"I came to have a good time and watch these foolish people chase a duck," he said.

Others said it was a good activity for everyone.

"It's the best family-oriented fun in Nebraska," said Brain Boggard of Omaha. He has been participating in the races since he moved to Nebraska five years ago. His duck, Hang Ten, advanced to the finals.

David Swanson, Manager of Gussy's Restaurant and Bar in Avoca and volunteer firefighter, said this year was slow.

"This year's wasn't very good. We're used to 140 entries and about 500 people in the bar," he said.

According to Brian Ehmke, the Avoca fire chief, 108 entered this year's race and about 400-500 people at the bar.

Gussy's Bar and Grill is the only bar in town, and although Swanson wouldn't disclose the amount of sales taken in Saturday, he said. "It makes my year."

The Quack-Off benefits the Avoca Volunteer Fire Department, with a \$10 registration fee and a \$5 duck rental. The firefighters sold sweatshirts, beer, "duckydogs" and burgers at the town hall, transformed into Quack-Off Headquarters. Swanson said he estimated about a \$5,000 profit for the fire department.

The earlier participants arrived, between the registration times 10 a.m. and noon, the better chance they had of getting a speedy feathered friend. Races began at 1 p.m. and lasted until about 3:30 p.m. The race was followed by a dance

First place went to Brian Gross of Omaha and his duck, Louie; second place went to Shane Cronican of Omaha and his duck, I Don't Know; third place was Julie Rybar of Bellevue and her duck, Duck Off; and fourth place went to Travis and Abbie Thustos and Joey McGahan, all from Louisville, and their duck, Rings.

Photos by Diane Broderick/DN

TOP: STEWART BREHM of Stromsburg races his duck, Pulsating Penelope, in the second round of races in the fourth heat. Though they put up a good race, Brehm and Penelope were not among the top four finishers. ABOVE: CONNIE CORNICAN of Omaha waits after winning her first race with her duck, Dixie. Cornican underwent surgery in September for toxic shock syndrome, but she didn't let that stop her from attending the Quack-Off.