

salty dogs

At these Down East dog trials, creativity prevails and cheating is encouraged.



One glance at the scruffy collection of canines gathered on the docks in Rockland, Maine, and you know: This is no ordinary dog show.

The four-legged contestants at this year's Boatyard Dog Trials aren't the kind of pups to preen. They seem more concerned with having a great swim than reaching the finish line. As organizer Dave

During the competition, Barbara Hart (above) throws a line to Jake from a small inflatable boat. This old dog learned his new trick at age 9. Right: Soldado and her handler perform elaborate stunts during the event's freestyle portion.



Getchell explains, "Perfection is not required here."

The idea for aquatic dog trials grew out of a column in *Maine Boats, Homes & Harbors* magazine. And publisher John Hanson Jr. says they've stayed resolutely informal from the start: "A wet dog takes the preciousness out of this event," he says. "We don't show up on Westminster's radar."

In this marquee component of

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the annual *Maine Boat, Homes & Harbors* Show, dogs compete in the obstacle course, a freestyle trick portion, and a free-for-all stick chase. There are three rules that may (or may not) be enforced. First, someone on each team must get wet. Secondly, cheating is encouraged, and bribery is a given for those who really want to win the treasured "Pup Cup." The third rule: There are no other rules. The judges' decision is final, and seriousness of any kind is strongly discouraged. "The idea is to avoid getting too competitive," says Dave. "It's about dogs and their people doing silly things."

As dog-and-handler teams prepare to parade through the show grounds, some grand posturing goes on. "You guys have already met and growled at each other," says Dennis Gallant to his teammate, Sadie, as they check out the competition. The defending champ, Boris Bearenau, an imposing Newfoundland, and his owner, Carlton Johnson, confidently join the group.

Though other contestants may lack experience and size in comparison, all have heart and style. Tyler, a Chihuahua, arrives the morning of the trials wearing a bright red life jacket and yawning deeply—obviously unimpressed by his opponents. His owner, Celia Knight, says, "Tyler has been training to get along with the bigger dogs. Mommy will be fetching the stick."

Jake, a 9-year-old black Lab, got the nickname "Black Vac" because of his fondness for crumbs and other people's lunches. He lost the 2003 trials for failing to cheat. His freestyle trick, devouring treats, was also suspect. "Eating is not considered a talent for a black Lab," says owner Barbara Hart. This time out, Jake sports a sailor suit and a few new tricks. During the freestyle portion, Jake catches a spring line from an incoming boat and pulls the craft to the dock. Bribes of homemade cookies are then ferried to the judges. "A black Lab giving *away* cookies is a trick," says Barbara.

Jake's main competition, Soldado, performs a more elaborate feat—climbing a ladder and helping to pull a rabbit out of her handler's top hat. It's enough to get her into a head-to-head struggle for the championship. But Jake's supporters wave signs and chant his name during the tiebreaker, resulting in his triumph. "The first year we played it straight—no cheating, no bribery," says Barbara. "This year we decided to step it up." ●

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As safety officer Tyler (left) wears his badge proudly. It's pinned to a life jacket that has a carry strap for owner Celia Knight. "He's like a six-pack," Celia says as she plucks him out of the harbor. Below: Designated course runner Henri shows contestants how to navigate an upturned dinghy on the obstacle course. The springer spaniel also delights the crowd by "singing" on cue.



The first rule of competition: At least one member of the team must get wet.