

Dog owners come from across the country for cow-dog competitions

By Nick Claussen
Athens NEWS Associate Editor

Athens County has another tourism event that's bringing in people from around the region, but this one doesn't involve Ohio University, the arts, Paul Bunyan or even skateboards.

This one involves dogs.

In particular, dogs that work on farms, herding cattle, sheep and horses.

Athens lawyer John Lavelle has a farm in the Fox Lake area of western Athens County, where he keeps horses and cattle, along with a few dogs. He also has a show arena, where he holds competitions for the working dogs (as in the popular movie "Babe"), while also holding clinics there.

This past weekend, a clinic was held for the dogs attracting dog owners from several states, around 160 dog owners signed up for a competition for their animals, and two dog owners from Delaware got married in the show arena during the clinic.

Lavelle has a place where dog owners can park their campers and stay for a few days during the clinics and competitions, and he said many people stay at hotels in Athens and the surrounding communities.

It's quite a phenomenon revolving locally around Lavelle, a person whom most area residents only know of as an attorney.

Lavelle has a large farm, though, and is well

Ericsson's dog Pearl knows 30 commands and he has worked with other dogs that know up to 56, he said.

known by people across the country who are involved with these working dogs.

Lavelle explained that when he was growing up, he spent a summer on a ranch in Wyoming, helping to drive cattle 25 miles through a small town and up into the mountains. While driving the cattle, he was impressed at how the working dogs were able to keep the cattle together and heading in the right direction. He knew then that he wanted to have dogs like that one day, Lavelle said.

Today, Lavelle has 40 cattle on his 200-acre farm, in addition to his horses. He has trained his dogs to work with his other animals, and is part of the Buckeye Cow Dog Association, which is a group of dog owners from across the region who attend clinics and competitions for their dogs.

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Dog trainer Gary Ericsson of Oklahoma has his dog, Pearl, move cows into a trailer inside the arena at John Lavelle's farm on Friday, in the photo above. In the photo on the left, Pearl keeps watch over the cattle while being told to stay still. Lavelle held a dog training clinic and a competition for cow dogs, at his Athens County farm over the weekend. Photos by Ed Venrick.

Local NEWS

Dog competition

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On Friday, Gary Ericsson of Oklahoma led a clinic, working with individuals from Ohio, Texas, Delaware, Illinois, West Virginia and around this area teaching their dogs to herd cattle in the right direction, getting them to obey commands, and working on other tricks. Ericsson's dog Pearl knows 30 commands and he has worked with other dogs that know up to 56, he said.

With a few simple commands, one dog can move cattle in either direction, get the cows to step up into a trailer, get them to leave the trailer and keep in a group, Ericsson said. He added that he trains the dog owners, not the dogs, at his clinics.

Albany residents Pam and Robert Jeffers attended their first clinic on Friday, hoping to learn some new tips for their dogs. Pam Jeffers explained that they bought a dog as a family pet, and then found that the dog liked working with cattle.

Robert Jeffers said he has been using the dog to drive the cattle away from him and out of the barn, and said the dog has been useful. He added that Ericsson told him, though, that he should train the dog to bring in the cattle first, toward him, rather than just driving the cattle away. Jeffers said he would have to retrain the dog a little, but added that he is happy to be learning about how he should train the animal.

Scott Pfeiffer, also of Albany, has three dogs that he uses for help on his farm. The dogs are a huge help to him, and one of his dogs has been a top finisher in several of the working-dog competitions, Pfeiffer said.

Herman and Jacci Cook of Delaware took part in the clinics and trials over the weekend, and got married in the arena on Friday.

Herman Cook, a dairy farmer who uses his dogs with his cattle, said the dogs make his work much easier. The couple has been attending the dog clinics and competitions, and has made friends with people from around the country like Lavelle, who are involved with these working dogs. The couple wanted to elope, so they thought the best place to get married was at the dog clinic with all of their friends and their dogs.

The couple got married in the arena on Friday, with Lavelle watching and taking pictures while riding on a horse, friends standing nearby supporting them. Several dogs kept one eye on the goings-on but also kept track of the cattle in the arena, carefully observing them so they would not move away from where they were supposed to be.

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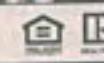
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