

# ON THE SCENE: Rotary celebrates 20 years of the Dam Duck Race

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Kate Thompson, Ernie Stretton and a duck (Provided photo — Naj Wikoff)

After dropping over the Mill Pond dam Saturday, Sept. 13, Sterling Hiltabrand's duck No. 1382 had such a commanding lead over its 1,999 yellow rivals in the Rotary Club's 20th Anniversary Dam Duck Race that it finished looking backward giving the feather to the laggards behind. But any feelings of superiority were quickly tempered by Rick Preston, who snatched the winner from the cool waters with his oversized net and flung the stunned duck up to Sean Donovan's waiting hands.

A very vexed Duck 478, representing Lucas McLean, just beat out Keith Carrow's 421 for second and third place, a tight finish for these two closely followed by many others.

Lake Placid Rotary's Dam Duck Race is the Rotary Club's lead fundraising effort made possible by the generous support of Lisa G's restaurant that donated another outstanding pre- and post-race pasta dinner, the cooperation of the Lake Placid Police that closed the section of Station Street near Lisa G's, and the many businesses and organizations that contributed a slew of runner up prizes, as well as one for the last Dam Duck to cross the finishing line. Not to be forgotten are the two dozen area youth who swarmed into the Chubb River doing their best to catch, find, and rescue about 1,960 ducks.

"We feel it's important for the people backing the ducks to carbon load before the race, that and because it's a good cause is why Lisa G's supports the race," said Tim Sweeny, Lisa G's Front of House Manager.

"I've been working on the Dam Duck Race since day one 20 years ago," said Rotarian and duck catcher Randy Quayle. "All the money raised supports local projects. Right now, we are helping the town set up a dog park near the horse show grounds. In the past, we've done bike racks, bus stops and fixed up some of the playgrounds in the village parks. We hope to raise over \$20,000 today."



Sterling Hiltabrand and his winning check (Provided photo — Naj Wikoff)

Quayle pointed out that the winner is the first duck they catch, not necessarily the first duck over the dam and through the finish line, though this year Hiltabrand's 1382 was a couple yards ahead of the second- and third-place ducks.

"We start a clock when the first duck passes the finish line, and five minutes later the timing gate closes and the last Dam Duck is called," said Quayle.

Not about to risk life and limb by scaling or repelling down to the river to catch slippery and wet yellow duck, Rotarian Roger Catania has been a member of the club for 12 years. He said he joined both to support activities and programs that benefit the community, but also as a way to meet and get to know people.

"I enjoy being with them and helping my fellow Rotarians organize and support projects that are made possible by this race," said Catania. "I've never won the race or come close, but since it's all for the good of the community, everyone who participates is a winner."

Former duck catcher and now Duck Race treasurer Ernie Stretton sold me three duck tickets, numbers 1996 to 1998, none of which placed. Last I looked, they were huddled in some eddy not liking the size of Rick Preston and Randy Quayle's nets.



Rick Preston (Provided photo — Naj Wikoff)

“I have in the past eagerly tried to net the ducks, most especially the first one,” said Stretton after he placed my check in water proof cash box. There are others who are doing that now. I’m over here behind this table keeping track of the money. As to whether or not I’m good at that depends on who you ask.”

Keeping a close eye on and sharing a table with “Crazy Ernie” Stretton was Kate Thompson. She said she joined Rotary as a way of supporting the community and spending time with fun people like her tablemate who has been a Rotarian since 1997.

“Crazy Ernie is wonderful,” said Thompson. “We love his sense of humor and he’s up for anything we ask him to do, including standing on his head.”

Newly minted Rotarian with three months membership under his belt, Preston either volunteered or was volunteered to clamber down to the river and catch hundreds of rubber duckies coming at him. I asked him what kind of training or inducements they provided to enhance his chances of catching ducks, much less the first.

“They interviewed me at one of our Rotary meetings,” said Preston. “At the time I was sitting next to Peter who said, ‘I’m not going to be there, do you want to catch ducks?’ I said, ‘OK,’ and that’s all the training I got.”



Erin Pelkey and Kayla Ippolici (Provided photo — Naj Wikoff)

“When I think of all the things you’ve done in your life, this has to be right up there,” I said.

“It is,” said Preston. “I’ve already put it on my CV, duck catcher.”

Not to make light of Preston’s abilities, but when he tossed the top three ducks up to the deck, with all eyes on him, Johnny Bench of the Cincinnati Reds had nothing over Sean Donovan.

“It took a lot of training to do that, but after a while you get the knack,” said Donovan without a trace of humility. “I had to be on my toes with a new man Rick Preston down there. When we interviewed him, he showed a lot of promise. We see him as a good young prospect, he’s agile. He’s a mountain goat standing down there on those rocks.”

Donovan said that as good as Preston, Quayle, and the two-dozen youth are, when you have 2,000 ducks coming at you a few might get through as they have in the past.



Roger Catania and Randy Quayle (Provided photo — Naj Wikoff)

Some have made it to Lake Everest in Wilmington. He said if anyone finds a duck to please bring it to a Rotary Club's 7:20 a.m. meeting help every Thursday at the Hampton Inn and they will treat you to breakfast and an hour of friendship.

"I feel fulfilled in having caught the winning duck on my first-time netting," said Preston, looking a tad emotional. "I exceeded my goal. I beat Randy to it."

Later a gleeful first-time participant in the Duck Race Sterling Hiltabrand seemed amazed to have won.

"I kind of jokingly said I was going to win it, and then I did," said Hiltabrand. "I'll definitely be back again next year."

Hopefully many others will too because the Dam Duck Race is fun and for a great cause.



Tim Sweeney and his mentor Awe (Provided photo — Naj Wikoff)

(Naj Wikoff lives in Keene Valley and has been writing his column for the Lake Placid News since 2005.)

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ean and Tina Leonard smile Sept. 11, 2021  
restaurant. They were co-organizers of the

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Compliments to Naj Wikoff for his entertaining and informative article on the 2025 Dam Duck Race that the Rotary Club of Lake Placid hosted in conjunction with Lisa G's as a community fundraiser. Great job, Naj. What I would like to add in honor of the event's 20th year is that the Lake Placid Rotary's Dam Duck Race was founded by two talented and visionary women, Debbie McLean and the late Tina Leonard, who ran it as Rotarian volunteers for 16 years until Tina's sudden passing in 2021. Thanks, Deb and Tina for your lasting legacy of creating a fun way to bring community funds to areas of community need!

Martha Pritchard Spear

Lake Placid

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