

Top gun

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Thetford trapshooter's record-setting accuracy makes him first Vermonter to win national title

By DENNIS JENSEN Staff Writer You could say that Dennis DeVaux was in two places on that special day. The Thetford trapshooter was in Vandalia, Ohio, trying to become the top gun in the Grand American Handicap at the Grand American World Trapshooting Championships. DeVaux was also in a zone on that day in August, a zone so perfect that he hit 150 out of 150 targets, a feat that has never been accomplished in more than 100 years of competition. DeVaux went on to win the Grand American Handicap, the first time the title has ever gone to a Vermonter. It was the best moment of my life in my career in trapshooting, he said. I was ecstatic. It's akin to winning a gold medal at the Olympics in a major event. More than 3,800 shotgunners competed in the event, the most coveted title in the 10-day tournament, held Aug. 8-17. The Grand American Handicap is usually won by a competitor from Ohio, Texas, Pennsylvania or Kentucky where trapshooting is huge, DeVaux said. In the Grand American Handicap, the better shooters are positioned further back from the trap house than competitors who aren't as accomplished, thereby leveling the shooting field. The shooters with lesser abilities stand closer to the trap houses. The closest you can stand is 17 yards. The farthest back you can stand is 27 yards. I've been at 27 yards since I was a junior shooter, 17 years old, he said. Typically, the champion has been someone shooting from shorter yardage (19 to 24 yards). DeVaux became only the fifth Grand American Handicap champion to win from 27 yards, the longest handicap distance, and only the fourth to win from that distance and knock down all 100 targets. But the road to victory wasn't accomplished by hitting a perfect 100 flying targets. DeVaux was forced into shoot-offs with two other 100 finalists, from Kentucky and Ohio, shooting from lesser distances. After the first round, the Ohio man and DeVaux both knocked down 25 out of 25 targets to move on to another round. Then DeVaux proceeded to hit another perfect 25 targets, while his opponent hit 22. I don't think the championship has ever been won that way, DeVaux said of his 150 consecutive hits. There are four trap houses in the

event. Each competitor must shoot at 25 targets coming from each trap house. The dome-shaped clay target, about 3½ inches in diameter, is ejected from the trap house at different angles, but always at the same height. The machine in the trap house is oscillating all of the time, so you can't tell what angle you're going to get, DeVaux said. But it didn't matter, in DeVaux's case. He blistered 100 out of 100 targets. It was just my day, he said. I've come close before, hitting 97, 98, 99 but never a perfect 100. Very few ever actually shoot 100. You have to have some breaks. It was just flowing for me that day, he said. Mike Pratico, a Rutland trapshooter who has won 20 Vermont state trapshooting championships, said that what DeVaux accomplished was extraordinary. He had a better chance of hitting the lottery, Pratico said. It's something in our fraternity that people only dream about. Pratico said that DeVaux is one of top trapshooters in the country today. Not only that, he said. He's a wonderful man with a great personality. It couldn't have happened to a nicer person. The 46-year-old DeVaux is a vice president at Upper Valley Press, a web offset printing company located in North Haverhill, N.H. His home range is at the Montpelier Gun Club, where he is a member. DeVaux was first introduced to shooting at the age of about 10 when he went to a turkey shoot with his father. He began shooting competitively at the age of 13. A trapshooter for 33 years, DeVaux is the Vermont delegate of the Amateur Trapshooting Association and a member of the board of directors of the ATA. DeVaux estimated that there are somewhere between 40,000 and 50,000 trapshooters in the U.S. It's a fun sport, but it's not always understood, he said. He used a single-barrel, 12-gauge Perazzi, an Italian shotgun, during the competition. For winning the Grand American Handicap, DeVaux was awarded a sterling silver carving set and a gold ring, mounted with a diamond and an emerald. DeVaux is still soaking up the wonder of that day. You could say it was like being in a zone, Your body is finely-tuned. You can tell that this day is going to be your day. You have the right amount of adrenaline flowing, but not so much that you can't manage it. Everything falls into place and I was able to carry that into the shoot-off too, he said. I've never had this feeling, ever, in my life.