

2026 AKC Scent Work Master National Championship

INCREDIBLY UNOFFICIAL CONGLOMERATED CROWDSOURCED DE-BRIEF

The author did not attend the event and any errors or inaccuracies are solely hers. The information comes from interviews with competitors and integrates comments from members of the public "Friends of AKC Scent Work" Facebook group.

Special thanks are owed to Leigh Gelotte, Jordan Lee Armstrong, Martha Colvin Agee, Trisha Burbach, Patricia Schneiderjohn, Rhonda Lockwood and Marsha Kingsley for their detailed recollections of the searches.

This document is entirely unofficial and has no input from the only people that knew where the hides really were – the judges – nor from the AKC.

140 dogs entered. 130 dogs attended. 70 dogs advanced to the 3rd day

Day 1 of Preliminaries – Sunday, October 18, 2026

Day 1 Containers

2:00 time limit. Judged by Amanda Hutchinson. 90/130 dogs qualified for a 69% pass rate

- In a small rectangular conference room on carpet.
- 20 containers. Most were described as ranging from approximately 6" in diameter to approximately 20" in diameter, generally no more than about 6" deep, made of metal, cardboard or plastic, of the "candy or gift box" type. There were also 2-3 suitcases in the back right corner of the "U."
- Arranged in a "U" shape with the opening facing the start line. There was room to walk on both the inside and outside of the pattern.
- Also present were the judge, timer and photographer who stood along the sides.
- There was one hide for a total of 10 possible points.
- 6 qualifiers earned a single fault, 2 qualifiers earned 2 faults (each fault means a deduction of 2 points). There were no "time out" NQs.
- The single hide was in the first box in the U shape to the left
- On-leash only.

Day 1 Buried

2:00 time limit. Judged by Patrice Dodd. 26/130 dogs qualified for a 20% pass rate.

- In a small rectangular conference room on carpet that was covered with self-adhering plastic.
- 16 AKC buried boxes, 8 water and 8 sand.
- Arranged in 4 rows, 2 rows of sand and 2 rows of water.
- Also present were the judge and timer.
- There were three hides for a total of 30 possible points.
- 4 dogs each earned a single fault. No "time out" NQs.
- The search could be run on or off leash

Day 1 Exterior

2:00 time limit. Judged by Josie LeBalch. 60/130 dogs qualified for a 46% pass rate.

- The search area was a long rectangular area next to a parking lot. About 2/3 of it was grass, with a sidewalk and some pavement. It was bound on one side by a tall (15+ ft stone wall) and cones. On the other “long” end of the search area and opposite the wall, a truck and trailer was parked just outside the cones. There were also two tall trees with large trunks and a wooden pallet in the search area.
- Also present were the judge, timer and photographer
- There were three hides for a total of 30 possible points.
- 2 dogs each earned a single fault. There were 15 “time out” NQs.
- Competitors described hides as being in a pavement crack, a hose and in a pile of broken blocks/rubble.
- No off-leash option.
- *Although it was not in play, many dogs used the truck to source hides*

Day 1 Interior

2:00 time limit. Judged by James Helems. This counted as “Part 1” of the Interior element which was spread over the two days. 70/130 dogs found all the hides in this search for a 54% pass rate for Part 1.

- The search area was a “typical” double queen hotel room, bedroom area and bathroom all in play.
- Also present were the judge, timer and photographer
- There were three hides for a total of 30 possible points.
- 6 dogs that qualified each earned a single fault but it is not possible to tell from published records whether that was on Day 1 or Day 2. There were 7 “time out” NQs between the two days.
- Hides were in the bathroom trashcan, on the middle bedside table between two queen beds inside the TV remote at least 5-6 inches from the edge of the table, and in a backpack that was hung on a chair at a desk opposite the beds.
- The search could be run on or off leash.



Representative / General images

Day 2 of Preliminaries – Monday, October 19, 2026

Day 2 Containers

2:00 time limit. Judged by James Helems. 94/130 dogs qualified for a 72% pass rate

- In a small rectangular conference room on carpet (same room as Day 1)
- 20 containers described as being large, including a 35-gallon tote, a large garbage can, a check-able suitcase, a birdhouse and large boxes.
- Arranged in an oval shape with some containers leaning against the outer walls of the room. There was no room to walk on the outside of the pattern.
- Also present were the judge, timer and photographer. The timer sat in the middle of the oval pattern.
- There were three hides for a total of 30 possible points. No qualifiers earned faults. One dog had a “time out” NQ.
- Hides were inside the birdhouse, in a large but short cardboard box and in a black trashcan. The birdhouse was the first container to the right of the start line, the trashcan was the 2nd container to the left of the start line. You could say it was a double threshold problem. The cardboard box hide was 4-6 containers in from the left side.
- The Day 2 container search could be run on or off leash. Some competitors were confused by the birdhouse, not seeing it as a “true” container.

Day 2 Buried

2:00 time limit. Judged by Josie LeBalch. 53/130 dogs qualified for a 40% pass rate.

- In a small rectangular conference room on carpet that was covered with self-adhering plastic (same room as Day 1)
- 16 AKC buried boxes, 8 water and 8 sand.
- Arranged in 4 clusters of 4 boxes each
- Also present were the judge and timer.
- There were three hides for a total of 30 possible points.
- 4 dogs each earned a single fault and one dog earned two faults. There were no “time out” NQs.
- There was one hide in each cluster except for the cluster closest to the start line. MANY dogs false-alerted on one particular bin in that first cluster.
- The search could be run on or off leash.

Day 2 Exterior

2:00 time limit. Judged by Patrice Dodd. 48/130 dogs qualified for a 37% pass rate.

- The search area made a U or C shape around the pond/gravel/tree pictured. The stairs on the left were a boundary. The front of the pond area was in play, but soccer dots were placed about 6 inches into that area. ~~The search area contained some grass.~~
- 3 dog-related distractions were visible.
- Also present were the judge, timer and photographer. The photographer and timer were standing at the same point of view as this photo
- There were three hides for a total of 30 possible points.
- 2 dogs each earned a single fault. There were 17 “time out” NQs.
- There were three hides, two of them on black chairs surrounding the tables. The first hide was on a chair at the first table on the right, closest to the start line. The start line would have been just out of view on the bottom right of this photo. The chair with the hide is just behind the first stone pillar. The second chair hide was on the 3rd table in the back corner, on the chair closest to the wall. The 3rd hide was on the small black table in front of the wooden bench in the center.
- No off-leash option.



Figure 1 - Courtesy of Martha Colvin Agee

Day 2 Interior

2:00 time limit. Judged by Amanda Hutchinson. This search included the last two rooms for the Interior element. 68/130 dogs found all the hides in this search for a 52% pass rate for Part 2. 50 of the dogs found all six hides for the Interior element Q for a 38% pass rate.

- The search area was a hotel suite. The first room was a living room with kitchenette. The second room was a bedroom with the sides of the bed coned off/out of play. There was a chair opposite the bed.
- Exhibitors had to call Finish after the first room and time stopped, but they were not told how much time they had left from the 2:30 total. Time re-started when they crossed the start line of the second room.
- Also present were the judge, timer and photographer
- There were three hides for a total of 30 possible points.
- 6 dogs that qualified each earned a single fault but it is not possible to tell from published records whether that was on Day 1 or Day 2. There were 7 “time out” NQs between the two days.
- There were two hides in the first room: a threshold hide on an entryway table, maybe 3-4 feet high and a low hide under the kitchenette cabinets on the opposite side of the room. The room was L shaped and small.
- The 2nd room had a chair hide opposite the bed.
- The search could be run on or off leash.

Day 3 – “Finals” – Tuesday, October 20, 2026

The highest scoring 70 dogs (with ties broken by faster time) advanced from the two preliminary days to the finals on the 3rd day.

On the 3rd day, no breakout was provided for scores between the two elements. Ranking was based on total points with ties broken by fastest times. Again, ten points awarded for each hide found, five points were deducted for each incorrect call or time out, and two points deducted for each fault. Only final scores were reported for each dog for these two searches combined, so we don’t know how many faults or errors were assessed although it’s obvious from the “not divisible by 10” scores that some were incurred.

Day 3 Container & Interior Combination

2:30 time limit. Judged by Kimberly Melton-Hall.

- Interior was in a large room that had two couches with an end table between them as well as a large conference table. There was a closed white board/projection screen-type cabinet on one wall. There was an adjoining bathroom and kitchenette, all doors were open. Some large luggage leaned against the wall and there were a few bags scattered throughout the room.
- Also present were the judge, timer and photographer.
- There were three hides for a total of 30 possible points.
- One hide was on the phone sitting on the end table in between two couches, one in a fabric bag on the floor against a wall, and one slightly elevated (maybe 3.5’) in a cabinet mounted on a wall. There was a food distractor in a cabinet in the kitchenette.
- The search could be run on or off leash.

Day 3 Buried & Exterior Combination

2:30 time limit. Judged by Carol Chase.

- The area was the part of the pool deck pictured with the addition of six buried containers.
- Also present were the judge and timer.
- There were three hides for a total of 30 possible points.
- There was a hide on a chair at one of the high-top tables, a hide on a small wooden table between the first and second lounge chairs on the opposite side and another crack hide under the covered area in the back corner of the search area. There was also a cold buried bin 4-5 feet away from the crack hide under that area.
- The search could be run on or off leash. Competitors were told they would be excused (“NQ”) if their dog touched the pool water.



Figure 2 - Courtesy of Jordan Lee Armstrong

Other observations from attendees:

The first ever AKC Scent Work Master National Championship was held last year at The Roberts Center in Wilmington, Ohio on October 12-14, 2025. There were 181 entries with 161 teams attending. 100 dogs advanced to the final round on the 3rd day. Handler discrimination was offered but did not play into the championship calculation at all.

This was therefore the second AKC Scent Work Master National Championship. It was held at The Chateau on the Lake, Branson, Missouri, on October 18-20, 2026, a new venue for AKC, although the AKC FastCAT invitational had also been held in Branson (at a different site) a few weeks before this.

For the Scent Work Championship, there were 140 entries with 130 teams attending. 70 dogs advanced to the final round on the 3rd day. Handler discrimination was not offered in 2026.

Communication: In 2025, the AKC Scent Work page on the AKC website was used to post information leading up to the event, including the catalog, and then scores and other information during the event.

In 2026, some information leading up to the event was posted on the webpage (and the 2025 information remains archived there) but the 2026 catalog was not made available online; the Premium included the statement "A digital version will be published online on the events main webpage where it will remain for historical purposes," which makes it seem likely that there was a technical issue with publishing the catalog online.

During the 2026 event, all scores were posted by the official AKC Scent Work account to Facebook.

Communication during the event was via text message and included check-in times, search block start times and notification of the availability of results on Facebook, but competitors were also notified of other things, such as the fact that only people staying at the hotel had to pay for parking (\$15 a day for the uncovered lot, more for covered and more still for valet) - "day use" exhibitors did not have to pay the parking fee and were given information on how to request a refund if they had done so.

Run order and trial progress was visible through the Secreterrier cell phone app to anyone with the QR code provided by the AKC.

Crating: Indoor crating was offered in the Windsor ballroom, which was carpeted and very large with plenty of room to spread out. There were Christmas trees. Handlers had to put something under their crates; the premium did not specify that it had to be waterproof but that would have been a good idea, given the carpet (2025 crating was on a much noisier hard surface floor).

Soft-sided crates were prohibited according to the Premium. Prior to the event, some exhibitors requested a waiver based on physical challenges in moving the heavier hard-sided or wire crates but were denied or their request was not answered. At least one exhibitor mentioned this when they arrived at the event and AKC staff offered to get help for her in loading her crate into the hotel, but she had brought her own support team.

Handlers could also choose to crate in their cars in the parking lot, but it was “a fair distance away” and there was a steep hill in between. Most communication was done through texting but those in the ballroom did get some instruction from staff directly, i.e. you had to be there to hear those updates.

No map of the grounds or facility nor directions to check in were provided.

Logistics

For the two preliminary days, handlers were divided into four groups and then rotated through the four elements. Everyone in each group completed each element before the four groups rotated and that timing along with lunch breaks were communicated via text.

Day 1 check in started at 7:30am. The first block of searches started at 9:30am, the second block at 12:30pm. The third block started at 2:55pm and the fourth block at 4:45pm. Searches were done at about 6:30pm with scores posted on Facebook at about 10:30pm. Competitors were allowed to keep their crates in the ballroom overnight.

Day 2 check in was at 7:00am with briefing at 8:00am. The first block of searches was at 8:45am, the second at 11:05am, the third at 2:10pm and the fourth at 4:15pm. Searches were done at about 6:30pm and scores were posted by 8:00pm indicating which 70 dogs would advance to the finals the next day.

For the third day, the handlers were divided into two groups which then swapped between the two searches.

Day 3 check in was at 7:30am with briefing at 8:00am. The first block of searches began at 8:50am and the second at 11:15am. The competition concluded at about 2:30pm and awards were held at 3:45pm.

Briefings, de-briefs and video / photography

Exhibitors received an “armband” sticker each day at check-in. It showed the order in which they would progress through searches for the day, i.e. “IECB” meant they would run Interior in the first block, Exterior in the second block, Containers in the third and Buried in the fourth.

Briefings were done in person before searches began each morning and in-person walkthroughs done for every search.

No de-briefs were provided.

Exhibitor self-recorded video was not permitted and there was no professional videography nor videos offered for sale after the event. The official show photographer was JM Photography www.jmphotography.us A few days after the event concluded, the AKC announced a photo contest for images from the trial, with the winning photo being placed on the back cover of the 2027 catalog.

No spectators were allowed in the search areas.

Gating and queuing:

The Secreterrier cell phone app was used to provide a planned run order (armband order or reverse armband order within each group) for each day. There were some issues with the Secreterrier app on Saturday morning in the Interior search (and user error may have played a part) but Secreterrier had staff on site who reset the app after the first set of searches and that seemed to fix the issue.

These were all very short searches but it could be hard to judge wait time even with the real-time display from Secreterrier showing which dog was running; there was significant “bunching” at the gate area and teams were sent in the order they arrived at the gate rather than in catalog order.

It was not unusual for teams going to searches to pass teams coming from searches in hallways and Buried, Containers and Exteriors all staged in the same (wide) hallway.

Environment

Those searching in exteriors were warned that hotel guests might walk through their search areas. The 1st room on the 1st day was on the 7th floor. The 2nd and 3rd rooms on the 2nd day were on the 6th floor and the finals were on the 3rd floor. The main staging area was on the 2nd floor. There were stairs available. The only elevator is glass-sided with an atrium view. The hotel is pet friendly and there was always the possibility of encountering non-event dogs.

A map to the grassy areas for dog pottying was provided in the Premium. The areas were well-supplied with bags.



(from the Premium)

Amenities and Awards

The hotel has an upscale dining room and a casual cafe; both are priced as expected in a luxury resort, but logistics also made it difficult to use those for meals or snacks throughout the day. There is also a Sweet Shop with pastries, sandwiches and ice cream, which was, according to some exhibitors, almost too easy to access. Exhibitors noted that the selection and availability of food for purchase, especially ‘healthier’ options, were both pretty limited and recommended bringing one’s own, which was allowed.

Human restrooms were very available and extremely nice.

Exhibitors reported that hotel staff were nice, friendly and very helpful throughout the event.

Pub Rev 2.0 Oct 25, 2026 changes have grey background -- This document is intended to document and preserve details about the 2026 AKC Scent Work Master National Championship from the competitor standpoint. It is not approved by the AKC. I hope it is objective and correct. If you feel it is not, please contact me at alert [at] wesmellbetter.com and I will try to make it right. Thank you! --Kristi Murdock

Some exhibitors had “trading cards” that showed their dogs and their accomplishments. AKC staff encouraged exhibitors to put these at the official table to facilitate exchange. Champ Dog Gear was in attendance taking orders for commemorative Scent Work Master National collars and leads.

Exhibitors received “swag bags” – an AKC-branded duffel bag with a printed catalog, a coaster, a pen, two stickers, poop bags, a gift bag from Tiny Baby Water Dragon that included treats and a hide vessel, two “Branson Bracelets” that provide discounts to area attractions and a t-shirt. Some shirts were printed with the event name and date, while others only had the AKC Scent Work logo. AKC staff told individuals who inquired that t-shirts were lost in shipping and would be mailed to attendees in the future.

Ribbon criteria was described in the Premium. Qualifying ribbons were the usual green flats with stickers. Ribbons for those advancing to Finals were nice rosettes. Ribbons for those finishing in the top 25 were very elaborate and trophies for the top four finishers were pretty crystal. Medallions were awarded to the top finisher of each represented breed. The criteria for the breed award was different from 2025, when only the total Preliminary score was used. This year, the scores from all three days were totaled.

What next?

- During the awards ceremony, AKC staff announced that there would be a 2027 event and that it would be held at the same place, Chateau on the Lake, Branson, Missouri
- Apparently, it is also possible that the event would “switch weekends” with the FastCAT Invitational. It was unseasonably hot, around 100 degrees, for FastCAT on September 18-21, 2026 at Sycamore Creek Family Ranch in Branson. The weather was pleasantly cool for the Scent Work Championship.