



King of the Outdoors

Paul Thompson '98 wins his third straight Field & Stream competition.

If you're a hunter or angler of the die-hard or even weekend-warrior sort, you've probably heard of Paul Thompson '98. The 33-year-old Marion resident has won *Field & Stream* magazine's Total Outdoorsman Challenge three straight years.

It's the "Renaissance Man" competition for the outdoor-sports world, says Amanda McNally, *Field & Stream's* director of public relations. While other competitions focus on a single skill, the national *Field & Stream* competition features seven disciplines: archery, rifle, shotgun, bass fishing, fly-fishing, ATV skills and an endurance event that includes starting a fire with a flint and knife and putting up a tree stand.

In September, Thompson beat 15 other finalists from across the country to earn his third straight title and \$25,000 in cash. "We'll jokingly call him the Ice Man

because he really focuses on the competition and a lot of competitors are rattled by the competition aspect," McNally says. "His base of knowledge is really huge. He really brings a good game when he comes to compete."

For Thompson, being the total outdoorsman comes from a life spent outside, whether it's fly-fishing on his favorite river or deer hunting in the woods. He was 5 when his great-grandfather took him on his first trip to the Swannanoa River in Asheville to fish for blue gill. Ten years later, a cousin took him to hunt for his first deer. Since then, his passion for the outdoors has only grown. "As soon as I was 16, I was skipping class and . . . going fishing," he says. "[I]f it was a challenge, I wanted to do that."

After studying wildlife management at NC State, he became a fly-fishing guide in Utah, then headed to Montana and worked in a sporting goods store as he fished the state's waterways. When he returned to North Carolina, he got a job doing research for the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service and spent his free time fly-fishing. For the past four years, he's worked as a wildlife

technician for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, where he does everything from indexing grouse and black bear populations to planting food plots and managing prescribed burns in McDowell County and the Green River Game Lands. "You've got to be a jack of all trades," he says.

But how has he been able to win the Total Outdoorsman title three years in a row and land on the cover of *Field & Stream's* May issue? By thriving on the competition and by setting goals for himself, he says, before joking that it's really "because I'm damn good."

He doesn't train for the disciplines, other than brushing up on his shooting skills. "A lot of it is natural. There are a lot of guys who have to train with a fly rod. I don't even worry with a fly rod. When I grab it, it's such muscle memory.

"You really can't practice for it."

Next fall, chances are that he'll be at the competition again, strategizing to win his fourth title—unless he lands his own TV fishing show, which has long been a dream. "I'll keep going until they buy me out," he says, "or somebody offers me a job."
—Angie Newsome