

Flyball comes to Palmer

Dogs will train for months before hitting stride

By MELODIE WRIGHT
Anchorage Daily News

(Published: June 14, 2006)

WASILLA -- The dogs strained forward, hind legs quivering, noses stretched, ears flat. Their owners, whose white-knuckled fists clenched their pets' collars, watched Curtis Smith just as intently.

"Go," he shouted and two competing dogs were off.

They glided over the four, 8-inch jumps on the smooth grass course, hit the purple box at the far end with all four feet in a perfect swimmer's turn, grabbed the jettisoned ball with snapping teeth and high-tailed it back down the 51-foot course in about six seconds.

As each of the four dogs in the relay crossed the finish line, their owner/handlers howled and jumped in congratulations. Toys and treats emerged from fanny packs as a mutual lovefest ended the flyball practice run at Anchorage's Mountain View Lions Park.

"Good girl, Tula, good girl," purred K.C. Wilson to her black-haired poodle mix.

Tula, whose legs prop her about four inches off the ground, is the shortest dog on the flyball relay. She's the team's height dog, or the dog for which the height of the four hurdles on the flyball course is set. Each team has one, and while the 8-inch hurdles are no problem for the bigger dogs on the roster -- Gracie, a St. Bernard-Black Lab mix, could gulp Tula up with room for dessert -- they challenge the smallest dogs.

The fruits of this practice, and countless others held each Sunday in Anchorage, will be tested this week at Alaska's first flyball tournament at the Alaska State Fair grounds. This state is a latecomer to the sport, which was first introduced in the U.S. in the early 1970s. More than 17,000 dogs are registered with the North American Flyball Association, and more play in England, Australia, Belgium and Italy.

DOGGONE HARD

The Alaska Dogs Gone Wild club started almost two years ago, when Curtis and Stacy Smith returned from North Carolina, where they'd been involved in a flyball club. A former agility instructor, Curtis sent an e-mail to his dog-owner acquaintances and collected a core group that began to practice.

While flyball looks easy to a spectator, a successful run takes months of training. The North



Indy, right, an all-American breed, turns the corner for the race back to the rest of the relay team after grabbing the ball during a Sunday morning practice session of flyball at the Mountain View Lions' Club field. (Photo by JIM LAVRAKAS / Anchorage Daily News)

American Flyball Association permits dogs as young as a year old to compete, but owners should have established control with obedience or agility commands. The sport is introduced in increments at short intervals -- say, 10 minutes at a time -- to compensate for a dog's attention span.

Maija Rhode has all three of her dogs involved in flyball, but only one, Zoom, a white Husky mix, has the whole routine down. Zoom was abandoned as a puppy on Anchorage streets because his former owner couldn't handle his hyperactivity. Rhode reacted to the challenge of tempering her mutt with agility training, at which Zoom excelled.

Like all beginners, Rhode gradually introduced her dog to the flyball box. Spring-loaded with a ball and sitting at the end of the four hurdles, it is the biggest challenge for a beginner dog. Rhode painstakingly taught Zoom to hit the box with his feet and trigger the ball he must carry back. The best technique involves all four feet as the dog hits the box, twists around and catches the ejected ball in the process of racing back to the start.

"It takes between six months to a year to (learn) the whole circuit," said Rhode, who first taught Zoom to hit her hand, then an 'X' on a target board, before introducing the box itself. "But he's got it now and he's pretty good. Not bad for a piece of garbage off the street."

Since dogs are flagged for mistakes, handlers also do "proofing," or create a distraction while the teams are running the course. This is where breeding and intelligence can make a difference. Border collies can be so focused, they're scary, said one former flyball handler. The breed dominates the top national flyball spots, but the highest-ranked dog in NAFA is a mixed breed.

The highest-ranked dog in Alaska Dogs Gone Wild is Linda Kreft's dog, Timber, a 6-year-old husky mix. Timber, who moved with Kreft from Michigan a few years ago, will soon be awarded the Onyx prize, given to dogs who have collected 20,000 points in competition. Since a clean heat timed at less than 24 seconds in competition garners 25 points, it can take a while to reach the highest echelons of flyball dogdom.

Fewer than 2,000 of all registered NAFA dogs have achieved an Onyx.

DOGGONE FAST

The Alaska club's tournament is broken into two, two-day competitions to give the visiting teams from Saskatchewan and North Carolina plenty of runs for their trip. Smith said DogGoneFast, the club from North Carolina, won the multibreed championship in its region last year and has a Weimaraner that has run the course in less than four seconds, round-trip.

Good2Go recorded a time of 18.2 seconds for one of its teams. DogGoneFast is seeded at just more than 20 seconds, and the Alaska team at 23 seconds. (The NAFA world record is less than 16 seconds.)

With that kind of speed, it's fitting the race is regulated by an electronic judging system. Smith compared the light tree between flyball lanes to ones used in drag racing. Laser technology keeps track of the dogs' individual times and signals fouls, like a bad pass when an outgoing dog crosses the start/finish line before the incoming dog.

This week's tournament will be fast and furious, but Smith said it's the fun that keeps handlers addicted to the sport. He's hoping the competition will garner interest in starting

another Alaska club, perhaps in the Valley.

"While it's likely true that all folks from DogGoneFast and Good2Go enjoy running fast dogs and winning races, if you spoke to each of them during a tournament, they would tell you that speed and winning is not what flyball is about," Smith wrote in an e-mail. "Instead, it's about the teamwork and camaraderie of the sport."

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IF YOU GO:

- Alaska Dogs Gone Wild's tournament will be June 21-22 and 24-25 at the north end of the Alaska State Fair grounds. Races will run on the hour from 10 a.m.-noon and 2-3 p.m. and will consist of five heats each. Leashed pets are allowed and admission is free. For more information on the tournament or the club, visit www.flyballdogs.com/alaska

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