

Dogs are catching on to wild sport of flyball

FAST AND FURIOUS: Relay races include all breeds and sizes.

By ROSE COX

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Move over, mushers, the dogs of summer are here and flyball is the new game in town.

The fast-paced sport for all sizes and breeds may not have the historical cachet of sled dog racing, but it's catching on. The second-annual Alaska Summer Solstice Flyball Tourney started Wednesday at the Alaska State Fairgrounds in Palmer. There's a break in the action today, and races continue Saturday and Sunday.

The tourney is hosted by Alaska's only flyball club, Alaska Dogs Gone Wild. The group of 30 or so enthusiasts from Anchorage and the Valley train year-round.

Flyball is a four-dog relay race. It's played on a 51-foot course with hurdles set for the smallest dog on each team.

When dogs get the "go" signal, they must run through the starting gate, leap four hurdles, hit a spring-loaded box to release a tennis ball, catch it in mid-air and hightail it back down the course as the next dog in the team is released.

Points are awarded for speed. The fastest time for completing a heat recorded by the North American Flyball Association -- which counts more than 18,000 registered flyball dogs -- is 15.22 seconds, said judge Curtis Smith, but that's indoors on artificial turf.

Athletes at Wednesday's barkfest ranged in size from a diminutive Ihasa apso to a 100-pound St. Bernard/Labrador. Mixed breeds joined border collies, pit bulls, Australian shepherds and Jack Russell terriers.

Whatever their lineage, they all focused on one thing: Getting the ball and bringing it back to the finish line for a treat.

Quinne, a border collie owned by Pam Holen of Wasilla, barely touched the ground between hurdles.

"She's shockingly fast, but she's really green," Holen said.



A tennis ball releases from the flyball box as 3-year-old Quinnie pushes the trigger with her paw on Wednesday afternoon. (Joshua Borough / Anchorage Daily News)



Linda Kreft releases her dog Indy, a 6-year-old husky, Wednesday afternoon during the Alaska Summer Solstice Flyball Tournament. Kreft and Ken Bullard, also of Palmer, were married wearing Alaska Wild green and purple tie-dyed T-shirts before the final race Wednesday. Their dog, Timber, was

"And she's a little psycho."

The skills needed to compete may appear simple to spectators, but training a dog is a multi-step process, said Alaska Wild club member K.C. Wilson. Her Ihasa apso, Maddie, and poodle/terrier mix, Tula, competed for the first time Wednesday.

"It took about two years to train them," she said. "They have to learn to go over the jumps, come back over the jumps, pass another dog. And they have to do it enough times so it becomes rote."

Dogs that are "ball-motivated" tend to be easier to train, said Linda Sell, dressed in pawprint earrings and a hat studded with award pins. The Michigan resident has been involved in flyball for 20 years, and competes in 12 or 15 tourneys a year. The North American Flyball Association ranks her dog, Xander, the No. 1 Jack Russell terrier, and No. 8 overall.

It helps to teach dogs each step separately, and then get them to put it all together flawlessly, she said.

Gracie, the 100-pound St. Bernard/Labrador mix owned by Lucy Frerich of Anchorage, repeatedly demonstrated a perfect four-paw turn off the box. Dogs are trained to turn with all four paws to reduce wrist and shoulder strain.

"She's the largest dog I've ever seen do a swimmer's turn," Smith said.

Typical tournaments feature 80 races a day, Sell said; the Alaska tourney is more laid back, with two races every hour. That leaves plenty of time for dogs to visit with spectators.

"I saw it on the State Fair Web site and thought it looked like it would be fun to see," said Guinness Collins of Palmer, who spread a blanket on the grass for her children, Eoghan, almost 2, and Finn, 8 weeks, under the gaze of Pioneer Peak. "Eoghan loves dogs."

The competition is cordial; Alaskans loaned dogs to a couple visiting from New Hampshire to round out their team. And more experienced handlers are quick to step up and help newbies.

Part of the game's draw is that it's an every-dog sport; mixed breeds are the most common dogs doing flyball, Smith said.

Maija Rhodes was running Zoom, a dog she rescued from the Anchorage streets and trained for agility and flyball competition.

"He's street trash, someone threw him away," she said of the cream-colored husky. "But he's got numerous agility titles and flyball titles now."

Smith and his wife, Stacy Smith, brought the sport to Alaska after joining a flyball club in North Carolina, where he was working on a doctorate in ecology at Duke University.

"We digested everything we learned, knowing we would start a group here," he said. "I

ring-bearer. The ceremony was officiated by Curtis Smith. *(Joshua Borough / Anchorage Daily News)*



Zoom, a 3-year-old Siberian husky, bounds over the last jump before reaching the flyball box, which is a spring loaded box that releases a ball for the dog to catch in mid-air. *(Joshua Borough / Anchorage Daily News)*

saved e-mails from all the dog enthusiasts I ever met and flooded them with messages, saying 'please check out flyball.' "

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SEE DOGS FLY:

Alaska Summer Solstice Flyball Tourney continues from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday at the Alaska State Fair grounds in Palmer. Park at the north end of the grounds by the purple gate. Two consecutive races of four heats each will be run on the hour, with a break for lunch at 1 p.m. In case of rain, makeup races will be held Monday. Bring a lawn chair or blanket; there are no bleachers. Admission is free. For more information, call Curtis Smith, 696-6940 or 240-2640; or visit flyballdogs.com/alaska.

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