

by Anne Douglas

## Flyball Cyno-speed

What do you get when you merge the World Cynosport Flyball Championships and the North American Flyball Association (NAFA)? The answer is simple: glass-shattering speed.

Though NAFA records have been set inside on mats instead of a less predictable grass surface, Cynosport-style flyball under the blazing Arizona sun saw nothing less than world-class running times.

In keeping with last year's breaking of the 16-second mark on grass by Michigan's world-record-setting team SpringLoaded, the first day of this year's Cynosport racing saw the New England Trailblazers achieve a 15.997.

And the Top Dog Racers' Chain Reaction team went undefeated, winning the whole tournament to become the World Cynosport Flyball Champions with a tournament best-time of 16.08.

How do top teams face a three-day tournament in the desert heat on a grass surface?

Some of the top teams attribute their success in Arizona to practicing in similar conditions. Michigan-based Front Runners made it into the Cynosport Championship Finals against Top Dog Racers. Front Runner Gerry Bradshaw says that his team made sure the dogs were prepared. "We practiced outdoors on several hot days prior to the trip. We made sure that our dogs got to run flyball on grass. We had not competed on grass for about a dozen years, so these dogs had never seen it," says Bradshaw. "And the dogs seemed to handle the heat in Scottsdale a lot better than some of us did!"

The Front Runners also made sure that their dogs were exercised a few times a week during the hotter parts of the days leading up to the trip to Arizona.

Pam Martin of the World Champion Top Dog Racers agrees that conditioning their dogs was a pivotal factor in their success. "Our team is committed to keeping our canine athletes in tip-top shape. For us, flyball practice is not where the dogs get some exercise or get into shape but is the place for polishing their flyball skills as needed."

Top Dog Racers' conditioning program includes a treadmill, swimming, playing with the "Chuck-it" and playing disc dog. According to Martin, team members are responsible for exercising their own dogs and deciding the best fitness plan for their lifestyle. The team believes that giving the dogs a couple of days off during the week to rest is equally important for the dogs' all-around health.

### Takeaway Tips

Train in an environment similar to the upcoming competition. For the Cynosport Games, that means hot, dry and grassy.

Place a premium on fitness. Team practice is for skills, not conditioning.

Cross-train for a well-balanced athlete.

Have a plan for keeping your dog cool and relaxed.

Foster team unity. Good relationships help create success.



Alaska Dogs Gone Wild flew 2,551 miles to attend the games

Cross training is also an important component of their flyball fitness program.

"Several of us compete in other dog sports and so we cross train often," says Martin. "I train frisbee and canine freestyle which helps exercise their bodies and I also train obedience which exercises their minds. I train at least three times a week. Others teammates train in agility."

Top Dog Racers also focused on keeping their dogs as cool and relaxed as possible at the show site, but no team had more expertise in this area than Alaska Dogs Gone Wild. This team from Anchorage, Alaska, flew 2,551 miles to attend the Cynosport Games. They kept their dogs — two of which were Alaskan huskies — cool with ice... lots and lots of it. Curtis Smith, one of the members of the Alaskan team, said that they also used fans, made good use of the available pools and kept water-soaked chamois on the dogs.

"There were some teams melting down but our dogs did fine," said Smith.

In addition to keeping cool, successful teams in Arizona cited team spirit as the secret to winning races. "I believe that our team having been together for twelve years is one of the keys to our success. We all have the same goal and each teammate is committed to working hard," says Martin of Top Dog Racers. "We have the best support team you will find — it's like in Nascar where the pit crew can play a major role in the outcome of the race. Each job is very important, from box loading to calling the passes, videoing and shagging balls."

Martin adds that the members of their team are also friends, going to the movies and going out to eat. Of course now that they're famous world champions, they may have to look for theaters and restaurants where fans and paparazzi can't track them down. **DS**