

PEPPY POOCH PARADE



A summer for the dogs

Timber, above, an 8-year-old Alaska husky, shows great form as he clears a hurdle during a flyball competition Thursday at the Alaska State Fairgrounds. Flyball is a canine relay competition that boasts participation of more than 16,000 registered dogs at more than 700 clubs in the U.S. At left, Bob Baker waves a dog toy and hollers for Mercury, a 5-year-old Australian sheltie.

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ALASKA SUMMER SOLSTICE TOURNAMENT



ROBERT DeBERRY/Frontiersman

Bob Baker watches as his 5-year-old Australian sheltie, Mercury, clears the hurdles during a flyball competition Thursday afternoon at the Alaska State Fairgrounds.

DOGS GONE WILD

Flyball is catching on with the canine lovers of Alaska

BY MATT TUNSETH

Frontiersman

PALMER — Move over, mushing, there's a new canine team sport on the dog lot.

Flyball, a kind of doggie-style relay race, bills itself as the world's "fastest growing dog sport," with more than 16,000 registered dogs nationwide. Competitions are now held at more than 700 clubs in the United States alone.

One of those clubs is the Anchorage-based Alaska Dogs Gone Wild, which is currently in the middle of its third-annual Alaska Summer Solstice Tournaments at the Alaska State Fairgrounds in Palmer. The first of two, two-day competitions wrapped up Thursday, with a second round set for Saturday and Sunday.

Debbi Hill, a founding member of the club, was one of roughly 40 individuals to bring their dogs out to the fairgrounds for the tournament on the second day of the event. Hill said she enjoys the sport because it doesn't take any special skill on the dog's part other than a willingness to learn. On Thursday, dogs of all breeds and sizes — from pugs to huskies and everything in between — raced against each other and the clock to see which

"You know everybody, and you know everybody's dogs by name."

— Ken Bullard,
Palmer flyball enthusiast

could post the quickest times.

"Any dog can do it," Hill said.

The idea of the sport is simple. Two four-dog teams run side-by-side down a 45-foot-long course, which is broken up by four hurdles. The first dog on each team must jump all four hurdles, then retrieve a ball suspended by a box at the midway point. Once the ball is retrieved, the dog runs back to the starting line, at which time the next team member heads out.

Penalties are given for dropping the ball or missing a jump. The first team to get all four dogs back to the starting line is the winner.

The height of the hurdles is determined by the smallest dog on the team. Smaller dogs means smaller hurdles.

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FLYBALL

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A four-dog run doesn't take long. The current world record of 15.22 seconds was set in 2005 by a team in Niagra Falls, Canada.

"We're not quite that fast," Hill said of Alaska's flyball teams.

In fact, she said that at this week's tournaments in Palmer, most teams were broken up to include a mix of faster and smaller dogs.

"We're not necessarily going for the fastest team at this point," she said.

That's because the club is trying to earn nationwide points for each dog. Any run that takes less than 24 seconds is worth a point, with points going toward nationwide titles and standings.

According to the North American Flyball Association, the sport was invented in the late 1960s or early '70s, but it

has only been around in Alaska for about three years. The first Alaska competitions were held in 2005, and there are now close to four dozen active participants in the state, most of them in Anchorage and the Mat-Su Valley.

The state's second flyball club, Northern Lightspeed, was recently formed by Palmer's Ken and Linda Bullard, who said they're hoping to continue to grow the sport outside of Anchorage.

"We're really excited about it," Linda Bullard said Thursday.

She's not kidding.

Three of the Bullards' six dogs participate in the sport, and the Solstice tournament in particular holds a special place in the couple's hearts.

"We got married here at this tournament last year," Ken Bullard said.

Ken Bullard said the biggest draw of the sport, for him, is the tight-knit group of dog owners who take part.

"You know everybody, and you know everybody's dogs by name," he said.

Linda Bullard said the only real criteria for interested dog owners is a willingness to train their animal.

"It just takes a good owner-dog relationship, and knowing what motivates your dog," she said.

Bullard said anyone wishing to get involved with flyball can visit the Alaska Dogs Gone Wild web site at flyballdogs.com/alaska. Or, better yet, folks can check out the tournament's second two-day competition, which will take place Saturday and Sunday at 10 a.m. at the fairgrounds.

Also, Mat-Su Valley dog lovers wanting to know more about the sport locally can visit the newly-created Northern Lightspeed Club at northern-lightspeed.com.

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