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Dogs gone wild

By: Colleen Kelly

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Real dogs - uncensored, uncut and out of control! Get your mind out the pooper scooper, people. It's not pooch porn, it's Alaska's only flyball team.

Flyball is a team sport for dogs. Essentially, it's a hurdles relay race for Spot. Two teams of four dogs race down a 51-foot stretch to a box with a ball in it. The first team to make it back in the shortest amount of time wins.

But to make things more sporting, en route to the box are four hurdles at 10-foot intervals that the dog must clear before advancing. In order to get the ball from the box, Fido has to trigger the spring-loaded panel that will release the ball. Once the ball is released, the dog jumps back over the hurdles towards the start/finish line. After the final hurdle is cleared, the dog passes a sensor where the next relay hound takes off.

The competition is open to dogs of all breeds, creeds and paws of life. It's one of the few animal competitions that integrate purebreds and rescues.

Speed and coordination are qualities expected in any kind of race ... but shortness? The hurdle height for each team is determined by the shoulder height of the smallest dog. Once the hurdles are in place, dogs and their owners can work on developing the basics: jumping, prompting, catching and retaining.

Many months are spent training the dogs just to stay in their lanes. Probably the only thing that could distract a dog from chasing after a ball is chasing after another dog. And when that other dog is running right next door, the temptation to cross over into the other lane can be irresistible.

Flyball isn't a skill learned overnight. Dogs Gone Wild owners ballpark the learning curve at a minimum of one year. Some people think, "I'll have this down in a few months' ... not so much," said Mieke Dupre, owner of a one-eyed rescue pooch named Mouse. Like people, dogs need motivation. After a practice run is completed, owners treat Mr. Barky Von Schnauzer to a wide variety of rewards ranging from traditional doggie treats to a piece of leather and a laser beam.

Flyball is a fast-paced sport ideal for dog owners and lovers. "We just fell in love with it in North Carolina and wanted to continue it up here," said Curtis Smith, co-founder of Dogs Gone Wild. He and his wife, Stacy, have hopes that all of the teams will finish under 24 seconds in the competitive circuit. And that's not 24 seconds per pup, but 24 seconds for all four canines to cross the finish line. "Races are won literally by tenths of a second," said Lucy Frerich, a flyballer and owner of a black Labrador Retriever/St. Bernard mix named Gracie.

Unlike "Girls Gone Wild," you don't need to be 18 years or older or spend \$19.95, plus shipping and handling, to see Dogs Gone Wild. The team offers demonstrations during half-times at select Anchorage Aces hockey games, at Summer Solstice at the Alaska State Fair, in Fur Rondy's Mutt Show and at Friends of Pets.

Dogs Gone Wild meet at the Alyeska Canine Trainers indoor dog training facility located at 549 West International Airport Road. Practice lasts from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday evenings. For more information on flyball, visit the official Web site of the North American Flyball Association at www.flyball.org.

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