

RUFF COMPETITION

Dogs, owners elevate fetch to fast-paced relay sport

BY GREG JOHNSON

Frontiersman

PALMER — Who knew fetch could be a spectator sport?

Dozens of dogs put their speed, agility and passion on display Wednesday and Thursday in flyball competition at the Alaska State Fairgrounds. Basically an organized fetch relay, flyball pits four-dog teams against each other to retrieve a ball. Each dog jumps a series of hurdles, releases the ball from a spring-loaded platform, catches the ball and races back as the next dog is released.

Dogs of all sizes, from pugs to huskies to collies, were yelping with excitement prior to competition Thursday afternoon.

"They just love it," said Debi Hill, a member of the Valley-based Northern Lightspeed club.

Hill races two Shetland sheepdogs — Killian, 7, and 5-year-old Amber — and said the speed of the competition and excitement the dogs display is infectious.

"If I had to ask (Killian), he'd say this is his favorite thing to do," she said while Killian strained at his leash and barked at other dogs while they raced. "Look at him, he's ready to go."

This week's competition drew owners and their pets to the fairgrounds from around Alaska and the Lower 48. A team from Colorado and Wyoming turned in a state record time of 18.08 seconds on Thursday, said Curtis Smith, an event official. The world record is 15.22 seconds. A team completes four relays, earning points for each. The lower the time, the more points that are awarded.

"The biggest aspect of flyball is that it's truly the only team dog sport," Smith said. "We think of it as a relay of sorts, but it's really as much social as it is competitive."

It's the socializing with other dog lovers that brings Hill com-



ROBERT DeBERRY/Frontiersman

A pug named Isabelle goes after a missed ball during Thursday's flyball competition at the Alaska State Fairgrounds in Palmer. Isabelle is ranked fifth in the nation for flyball.

IF YOU GO

Valley-based Northern Lightspeed flyball club is hosting another tournament this weekend — all day Saturday and Sunday — at the Alaska State Fairgrounds in Palmer. There is no admission fee and spectators are welcome.

MORE ONLINE

Learn more about flyball through the North American Flyball Association, www.flyball.org.

ing back to flyball.

"The people are just wonderful and the competition superb," she said.

Watching the performing pooches were Eric Spradling-Reim, 13, and his 10-year-old sister Jessica. They never heard of flyball before, but decided to check it out.

"At first I thought it would be boring," Jessica said. "But surprisingly, it was a lot more fun

watching them than I thought it would be."

The smaller dogs — called the "height dog" because the smallest dog on the team determines how high the hurdles will be — were especially fun to watch, she said.

"I think the little dogs are the funnest," Jessica said. "It's fun to watch them doing their jumps."

That the dogs seem to love flyball impressed Eric.

"This really is fun to watch,

and it looks like they really enjoy it too," he said.

Keri Caraher of Fort Collins, Colo., made the trip to the Last Frontier after about three years of considering it. The mild-summer temperatures are ideal for the dogs, she said, and the scenery spectacular.

"Every year we always want to go here," she said. "This is awesome. I love it, and the dogs race better when it's cooler."

In putting together the state record-setting team, Caraher said the hope was to get a time of 17 seconds or lower. "We put together our four fastest to get a best time."

Walt Marshall lives in Laramie, Wyo., and travels with the team because "this is the funnest thing I've ever done in my life."

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FETCH ON THE FLY



ROBERT DeBERRY/Frontiersman

A Jack Russell terrier named Lucy clears a small hurdle on a flyball course Thursday morning at the Alaska State Fairgrounds in Palmer. See story and more photos on page A11.



ROBERT DeBERRY/Frontiersman
Flyball competitor Jody Metcalf gets ready to release her border collie, Rosie, during Thursday's flyball event at the Alaska State Fairgrounds.