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Flyball fever: Interest in canine sport continues to grow

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Flyball

Zoya and her owner Mesa Smith are racing at Summer Solstice Flyball Tournament this week at the Alaska State Fairgrounds in Palmer.



Posted: Thursday, June 14, 2012 8:10 pm

By **TIM ROCKEY** Frontiersman.com | **0** comments

PALMER — Curtis Smith likes to bring his family to flyball tournaments. Now his family is growing to become part of the event itself.

Smith's 8-year-old daughter, Mesa Smith, raced her dog, Zoya, at her first Summer Solstice Flyball Tournament this week at the Alaska State Fairgrounds in Palmer. Curtis Smith's flyball club, Alaska Dogs Gone Wild, faced Pawsitive Synergy in a battle of Anchorage teams in the tournament, which continues on through the weekend.

Mesa has been around the sport since birth and raced Zoya at a flyball competition for the first time last November. For a sport that hopes to grow in the Valley and around Alaska, young enthusiasts like Mesa Smith are the future of flyball.

"She's fast when she wants to be," Mesa Smith said of Zoya. "It's a lot of fun. I want to take Zoya to Can-Am."

Can-Am is the North American Flyball Championships in Indianapolis, Ind., an event many Alaska owners take their dogs to.

Flyball is a competitive relay race between dog teams. Each team of dogs must successfully jump over four hurdles, release a ball from a spring loaded box and return to the start with the ball as fast as possible.

"We love to be able to spend time with your dogs and your friends," said Debi Hill of Pawsitive Synergy.

Most team members can be found lounging in lawn chairs with their dogs and family before races. When it is announced that there are only five minutes to race time, everything sets in motion.

Race preparation is quite the spectacle. Each team brings their dogs backward through the course. The owner leaves his or her dog at a spring-loaded box, then rewards the pet as they reunite at the start, along

with some sort of ritual, usually involving a toy or rope. Awaiting the start, owners yell and scream to get the dogs fired up about running the course.

When the lights turn green, the excitement begins. Amidst screams, yells, barks and cheers, the dogs race off to retrieve the ball and return to pass the turn to the next dog.

The pass from dog to dog is a key point in the race. Owners must time their release so that their dog does not leave before the other returns. Every dog and every owner is different. Angela Parsons has a very distinct scream she lets out to encourage her dog, Ginny, through the course.

"We don't try to control the enthusiasm," Hill said.

The Solstice Tournament is in its seventh year, but this is the first year without a team from the Lower 48. The first day of the tournament was rained out, but dogs and humans alike enjoyed sunny conditions Thursday. Both teams will host two other tournaments during the summer.

"She lives for this sport," Parsons said. "We did other sports, but we like this one because it's about the team."



ROBERT DeBERRY/Frontiersman.com

Flyball

Toby clears the small hurdles on the flyball course at the Summer Solstice Flyball Tournament at the Alaska State Fairgrounds Thursday afternoon. The tournament continues through the weekend from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.



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