

Monday, July 30, 2007

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Outdoors Story Published On 7/27/2007

Ice arena goes to the dogs

By Eve Newman
Boomerang Outdoors Writer

Laramie's Hole-in-the-Wall Gang Flyball Club will get to compete before a hometown crowd at the state's first flyball tournament. Teams from Colorado, Iowa and Utah — 24 in all — will be at the Laramie Community Ice Arena today through Sunday for the free event, a high-speed team sport for dogs.

That means almost 100 dogs will be running at full speed inside the arena. In the relay sport, teams of four dogs run down a 50-foot runway over four hurdles, turn around on a spring-loaded box that launches a tennis ball, catch the ball and run back. Two teams compete at a time in head-to-head races.

At a recent practice at the Laramie Civic Center, the Hole-in-the-Wall Gang warmed up by racing back and forth along a rubber mat.

About 10 dogs waited in kennels for their turn to run, ranging from high-speed veterans to first-timers. As other dogs ran back and forth, those waiting barked and barked and barked, eager for their chance, their noise magnified as it bounced off the gym walls. And when their owners finally led them from the kennel to the runway, they trembled with anticipation.

Then the owners placed the dogs in turn at the very far corner of the runway, holding the back haunches, as the dogs yipped and pulled and shook with excitement, muscles taut. When finally released, the dogs streaked over the hurdles, owners cheering and running alongside.

Steve Miller, who owns six dogs, brought the sport to Laramie from the East Coast.

"We came out here, and there wasn't anything going on for a very, very long time," he said. "But now it's really spread throughout the West. We go to tournaments in the summer and fall just about every other weekend."

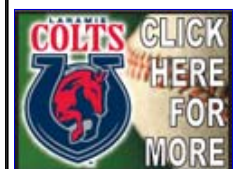
He led out Mickey, part border collie and part wolf hound, for a turn. Large and white, Mickey is one of the team's fastest members. Miller asked Mickey if he was ready, and Mickey barked twice into the air. That barking sprung the rest of the dogs from a rare lull to a cacophony of frenetic yammering.

Gypsey and Brady were next, both border collies who were adopted from Wyoming Border Collie Rescue, an organization that rehabilitates abandoned dogs.

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Miller said the sport was well-suited for border collies, who need lots of exercise.

"They're a high-drive dog. They need a job. Since we have border collies but no sheep or cows or anything, this is their job, and boy, do they love it," he said.

But the sport isn't just for border collies, he said. The tournament has a multibreed division, where every dog on the team has to be a different breed. Also, short dogs are a hot commodity, as the hurdles the entire team runs over are leveled to the size of the smallest dog.

"It's good to have fast dogs, but it's also good to have short, fast dogs," he said.

Boomer, a black border collie/retriever mix, loped over the hurdles as his owner, Janice Sexton, cheered him on. As he finished his turn, he dropped the ball and dove for a tug rope she dangled, turning circles while she encouraged him.

Sexton said she heard about the sport from the woman who does her nails, and after trying it once, she kept going. After seven months of training, Boomer, whom she adopted from the animal shelter, was ready to compete.

"Boomer is just my little kid. He's not real ball-oriented, he does this just for fun," she said. "It's just something to do together."

Plus, Boomer gets his exercise.

"The dogs go home and they're tired, if nothing else," she said.

Though not quite ready for competition, Riley, a corgi owned by Stephanie Anesi, showed off his moves at practice. As he took two steps between hurdles where others took one, he zoomed down the runway, head bobbing a foot off the ground.

At the end of the runway, Bob Sexton, Janice's father, worked the spring-loaded box. The box contains a hole for a tennis ball about a foot off the ground, and the dogs turn around by hitting the slanted front plate with all four paws and springing back down the runway, much like the flip turn of a swimmer. Hitting the box releases the tennis ball, which the dog has to catch before returning.

After each turn, Sexton pulled a tennis ball from a bucket beside him and reloaded for the next turn. He also had to brace the box against the high-powered impact of the dogs running at full speed. He said Brady hits the hardest.

As he looked away for a moment, Miller walked Mickey past the box. Spying the tennis ball loaded in its port, Mickey pulled away from Miller to hit the box with his front paws. He snapped up the tennis ball that popped into the air and kept walking.

Sexton saw the empty port and reloaded a tennis ball.

Then Gypsy walked by and knocked the box, snatching the tennis ball and walking away.

Miller said he trains the dogs by breaking down the whole operation into several fun games. Pepper, a black border collie, practiced turning on the box by chasing a braided rope on and off the box. Other dogs practiced just running up and back over the hurdles, sometimes getting distracted and



veering off course or turning around to chase each other. Baby gates lined up along the runway helped the new dogs stay on track.

Watching from the side was Chariti Johnson, who brought Kasey for the first time. She's owned Kasey for three months and found the team through its Web site. Later, Kasey took a few turns running from one end of the runway to the other as Johnson called her. Everyone else watching either cheered or barked as she ran by.

The tournament starts at 6 p.m. Friday with multibreed and veteran classes. Racing resumes Saturday and Sunday at 8 a.m. There will also be concessions and a raffle. Admission is free. The team practices every Sunday from 1:30-4 p.m. at the Civic Center. For more information about the tournament or the Hole-in-the-Wall Gang, visit www.flyballdogs.com/

[holeinthewallgang.](http://holeinthewallgang.com/)

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