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December 16, 2007

Dogs show their skills in flyball demonstration

Jakob Rodgers
November 10, 2007

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With its large, hairy ears pinned back against its body by the passing wind, Trinket, a 3-year-old Papillon hurdled down the 51-foot course before leaping onto the angled wooden board that would send a spring-loaded ball flying back in its direction.

All in the day's work of a flyballer.

Residents were treated to a rare show as the up-and-coming sport of flyball made an appearance in Greeley on Saturday. The demonstration was part of Tailwaggers' Fall Festival, which offered a variety of services for pet owners including agility and obedience demonstrations as well as low-cost vaccinations.

The unusual sport, however, drew the most attention as it isn't every day one sees a dog compete on a relay team.

"It's intense," said April Emerson, an employee of Tailwaggers who was witnessing it for the first time. "I like it. It would be something that definitely people should know about if they have a border collie or a high energy dog."

The sport, which is among the fastest growing in the nation, is a relay race for dogs in which teams of four race down a 51-foot hurdle course before reaching a box with an angled side. Jumping and using the side as a kind of springboard to return in the direction that it came, the dogs also must catch a spring-loaded ball which is flung in the direction of the dog as it lands on the contraption.

As Stuart VandeVenter, a member of the Rocky Mountain Flyball Club, points out, the sport can be a tricky one for man's best friend to pick up.

"It depends on the dog, but you're looking at least six months of training minimum for your average dog to do this," VandeVenter said.

However, according to Steve Clink, the event's coordinator, the dogs don't mind the extensive preparation.

"The dogs just get jacked up -- I tell you they love it," Clink said.

The fall festival also featured some other -- more common -- attractions including pet adoptions and inexpensive vaccinations. Tailwaggers donated 10 percent of the day's proceeds to Second Chance Rescue, K-9 Bed and Biscuit and the Humane Society of Weld County.

However, the highlight of the event remained the unusual sport making a rare appearance in the region. The exhibition probably gained a few new fans and perhaps new participants. Yet, there may be a few roadblocks for some people who wish to get involved in the sport.

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