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December 16, 2007

Simply fetching: Dog show off flyball skills

Jakob Rodgers
 November 11, 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 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.

Limmon Johnson of Brighton gets her border collie mix, Bella, psyched up to charge down the flyball course on as Sadie, left, barks on Saturday morning during the Fall Festival at Tailwaggers in Greeley. In flyball, dogs race over hurdles and retrieve a ball launched from a box then return to their owner before the next dog starts down the course.



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