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December 16, 2007

Dogs, owners participate in frenzied flyball competition at The Ranch

Rebecca Waddingham
 November 21, 2005

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LOVELAND -- Midway through the last relay race of the day on Sunday, an over-enthusiastic competitor stole Winston's tennis ball.

But Winston, a two-year veteran of the frantic canine sport called flyball, was unfazed. He picked up the intruding border collie's ball and happily crossed the finish line, getting a treat from his owner, Mary Martin of Longmont.

Winston is a papillon, a small type of spaniel named after the French word for "butterfly" because of the breed's large, erect fringed ears. The dogs are more often seen on laps or silk pillows than on competitive agility tracks.

But wee Winston, ranked 16th in the nation among flyball-playing papillons, could certainly hold his own.

Any breed of dog is allowed on a flyball track, and although border collies and Australian shepherds made up the majority Sunday, a fair share of labs and other breeds were there, too.

"It's a great socialization for the dogs," said Martin, who brought another papillon, Trinket, to a livestock event arena at The Ranch for the flyball competition. "(Flyball) is probably one of the fastest-growing canine sports."

Danny Fitts, vice president of Colorado RUFF, a Denver-based flyball team, talked about the sport over the din of dozens of barking dogs.

Dana Nichols, also a member of RUFF, said one of the best things about the sport is its nondiscrimination: no American Kennel Club membership required, and any average mutt can play.

But that also means trouble for flyball when clubs seek a venue for a tournament, Nichols said -- cities with breed bans, like Denver, can't host the sport.

HILLARY WHEAT/wheat@greeleyt
 Rosie Fivian of Boulder releases her border collie, Charlette, to take its turn in the team flyball competition. Fivian and Charlette were at the Ranch in Loveland on Sunday for a flyball tournament comprised of 16 teams from around the Denver area.
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