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Top News Stories

Flyball comes to Wyoming

By Karla Pomeroy
Boomerang Staff Writer

Dogs are learning to fly, or at least race, in Laramie with the formation of a flyball club in Laramie.

The Hole-In-The-Wall Gang is the only flyball club in Wyoming at this time, according to club organizer Steve Miller.

Miller said the Hole-In-The Wall Gang competed in its first tournament last weekend in Brighton, Colo. Flyball is relay racing between two teams of four dogs. Dogs jump four hurdles on the way to a box, trigger the box releasing a tennis ball, catch the ball and carry it back over the hurdles, Miller said. The size of the hurdles is determined by the size of the dogs, Miller said. The larger the dogs, the higher the hurdles are, ranging from eight inches to 16 inches. Right now, the Laramie club has large dogs, so they are jumping at the top height.

"We're looking to recruit dogs; short, fast dogs," Miller said. The world's record is 15.22 seconds for a team. In practice, the Laramie club runs about 24 seconds.

"It's not just for the fastest dogs," he said. Each team sends in a seed time, and they are placed in divisions based on those times. A team cannot be under their seed time by more than two seconds in a tournament, he said, in order to have teams compete with other teams of similar size and skill.

Members of the Hole-In-The-Wall are Miller, McClean, Janice Sexton, Louise and Bob Sexton, Julie Altstaetter and Julie Wickett. Miller said they have six members and five dogs. Miller said they welcome anyone who wants to come and try flyball with their dog, or anyone who might want to help train other dogs. He said he has four flyball dogs, but due to the nature of the sport, the dogs have to be trained one-on-one.

Most dogs are Border Collies because they are ball motivated, easy to train



Border collie Lanie grabs a tennis ball from the box and makes a turn to race back down over the four hurdles during the flyball demonstration at the Albany County Fairgrounds Thursday as part of the Western Outlaw Festival.



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and fast, but Miller said all types of dogs compete.

Miller learned the sport of flyball when he lived back East. When he moved to Laramie there were no clubs in Wyoming and only three in Colorado. In the last five years, he said flyball has really taken off. Laramie competes in Region 19 with clubs from Colorado and New Mexico. Prior to forming the Hole-In-The-Wall Gang, Miller and Terry McClean used to do demonstrations

He said they went to the club format so that anyone could join at any time.

Miller said they are hoping to get the 4-H involved in the sport and in the club as well to generate more interest in the sport.

The team practices nearly every Sunday (taking this Sunday off) from 1:30-4 p.m. at the civic center. Miller said they will be holding demonstrations during Freedom Has A Birthday next month and Dog Day Afternoon in August.

Anyone interested in helping the club or in trying out their dog can come by practice or contact Miller at 742-9120 or by e-mail at fungi@uwyo.edu.

Thursday afternoon, residents who attended the flyball demonstration as part of the Western Outlaw Festival at the Albany County Fairgrounds got a taste of the only dog team sport as the Laramie club competed against RUFF out of Colorado. RUFF has been competing for about six years and has members from all around the Denver area, including up to Fort Collins and down to Colorado Springs.

Melinda Fitts, Region 19 director, said she would like to see the sport grow because right now, most of the tournaments are held in Colorado. New Mexico will be hosting its first tournament in September. New Mexico has been competing just slightly longer than Wyoming, she noted.

Fitts said she and her husband got involved in the sport five years ago in Texas. They had gotten a border collie and saw the sport on TV and realized the sport would be fun for the dog, and they wouldn't have to keep throwing the ball.

As they competed, she said, "We got hooked." She noted it is the only team dog sport with everyone having to be in sync. "It's just like having a kid in sports," she added.

When the sport first started, she said, there was a catapult system that would launch the ball, and the dogs would run over the hurdles to get to the ball. Now, they have the box that holds the ball at the end of the run. She said dogs need to be trained to hit the box correctly in order to avoid injury. She said if dogs do it properly, it is similar to a swimmers turn. "The best teams have the best turns," Fitts said.

Teams are also judged similarly to swim relay teams, in that they make sure that the dogs do what they are supposed to do, not miss the ball, not miss a jump, etc.

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