

Flyball Fetches Its First Winners Trophy

New organization announces championship event for growing dog sport.

Dogs who love running and catching a tennis ball tossed in the air will soon have their own version of the World Series.

The first flyball national championship in North America its a casual but competitive team sport for dogs will be held this year, tentatively scheduled for the second week in November. The event will be sponsored by the United Flyball League International, a 1-year-old organization that was formed to promote the sport, which has been popular among dog enthusiasts since the 1980s.

The organization also announced dates for three qualifier tournaments: in Campo, Calif., on May 13 and 14; Henry, Ill., on July 1 and 2; and Talladega, Ala., on August 26 and 27.

We've got a lot at stake in making this work, said Brett Williams, a spokesman for the league. We want to keep everything fair, clear-cut, with easy-to-read rules.

Flyball is a relay race, with a team of four dogs trained to run across a series of four hurdles, jump on a spring-loaded box to launch a tennis ball, catch the ball and run back. The course is about 50 feet long, and the fastest flyball teams finish in a little over 15 seconds.

Historically, the sport has been played like a weekend softball league. Families with energetic pets join or form flyball teams in their neighborhood to practice and compete in regional tournaments, held in venues such as parks or convention centers. All types of dogs can compete, from purebreds like Border Collies (an active and popular breed) to mutts adopted from the local shelter.

Everybody gets into the sport for the fun of it, Williams said.

The North American Flyball Association was formed in 1984 to organize tournaments and keep records. But the organization has never had a national championship event, instead using a point system for dogs and teams to earn titles.

It was that lack of a championship, and some disagreement about rules, that prompted a group of 12 flyball enthusiasts to break off from NAFA and form their own league, UFLI.

According to Williams, the primary difference in how the championship will be played is how the height of the jumps is measured. Traditionally, the smallest dog on each team determines the jump height, which is half the measurement of that dogs withers to the ground. But UFLI simply measures using the length of the smallest dogs foreleg, which eliminates any possibility that the dog might crouch when measured, affecting the jump height.

UFLI now has more than 100 teams registered and is growing quickly, Williams said, so anticipation is high for the championship. There will be seven divisions of teams (based on previous times), allowing 28 dogs to emerge from the event as winners, rather than simply earning points toward a title.

Representatives from NAFA could not be reached for comment on the event.

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