

## ALASKA HOSTS FIRST STATE FLYBALL TOURNAMENT



PATRICIA BUXBAUM/*Frontiersman*

Linda Kreft of Houston releases her husky mix, Timber, at the start of a race at the Alaska Summer Solstice Flyball Tournament at the Alaska State Fairgrounds in Palmer on Wednesday.

# DOGS GONE WILD

BY LEILA KHEIRY  
*Frontiersman*

PALMER — It's called flyball, but it's the dogs that really soar.

Well, most of the dogs, anyway. A few meander, and some just want to sniff their neighbors and visit. But most are so eager to "fly" over the hurdles and grab that ball, they have to be held back.

Alaska's first flyball tournament started Wednesday at the Alaska State Fairgrounds in Palmer, with competitions also scheduled for Thursday. A second tournament competition is set for Saturday and Sunday, starting at 10 a.m. each day.

Flyball is an emerging dog agility sport that involves teams of four dogs running against each other. Each dog jumps four hurdles spaced evenly on a 51-foot track, triggers a spring-loaded box to release a ball, grabs the ball and carries it back over the four hurdles.

All in about six seconds.

See FLYBALL, *Back Page*



Grace, a black Lab cross, races through the hurdles during the Alaska Summer Solstice Flyball Tournament at the Palmer Fairgrounds Wednesday.

PATRICIA BUXBAUM/  
*Frontiersman*



PATRICIA BUXBAUM/Frontiersman

Linda Kreft's husky mix, Timber, races across the hurdles as the Alaska Dogs Gone Wild team looks on at the Alaska Summer Solstice Flyball Tournament at the Palmer Fairgrounds on Wednesday.

## FLYBALL

Continued from Page A1

Curtis Smith of Anchorage, co-founder of Alaska Dogs Gone Wild flyball, said he and his wife first got involved with flyball while attending college in North Carolina.

"We've always done a variety of dog sports," he said. "We figured we'd give flyball a try. We hooked up with one of the numerous teams down in the Raleigh area, and we just really loved it. We knew even before we came back that we were going to try to get it started up here."

Coincidentally, about the time the couple moved back, Linda Kreft of Houston also was ready to organize a flyball team in the area.

Kreft, originally from Michigan, had been training her dog, Timber — a rescued husky mix, now 6 years old — since the dog was a puppy. She moved to Alaska several years ago, and did some demonstration flyball runs during an Alaska Aces hockey game. She said she later connected with Smith and his wife, and they decided to get a team together.

Kreft said she loves the camaraderie associated with flyball, and the fact that it's a team sport that lets her work — and play — with her dogs.

Kreft has two other dogs in addition to Timber, one that competes in flyball races and one that she is training. Timber is the most experienced, and is well on the way to earning flyball's prestigious onyx award for amassing 20,000 points.

A dog earns 25 points for each successful flyball run.

Timber earned at least 100 points on Wednesday morning, and showed her championship form clearing the hurdles and grabbing the ball in mid-turn before returning to Kreft. The dog didn't seem distracted by the cacophony of barking or the shouts of encouragement from other dog handlers.

Focus appears to be as important as speed in flyball, and the border collies racing Wednesday had both those characteristics, almost literally flying over the hurdles with their eyes locked on the ball. Other dogs were less focused, like the speedy Weimaraner who veered off track during a practice run to gobble treats from a bag left on the ground; or the young Australian shepherd who crossed over to the other track, bowled over a tiny terrier and grabbed the ball from the wrong box.

Then there was the corgi, who was eager and well-trained, but barely cleared the hurdles with his low body.

While border collies are a natural for the sport, any breed — pure or mixed — can participate, said Smith. The Alaska team has everything from a 4-pound Pomeranian to a 95-pound St. Bernard-Labrador mix. Each relay team includes a small "height" dog, he said, because the height of the hurdles is based on the shortest dog on a team.

On Wednesday, one of the Alaska team's height dogs developed a new issue. The little canine would run happily over the hurdles, and run back, but kept forgetting to trigger the box and retrieve the ball. Smith said the morn-

### IF YOU GO

**What:** Alaska's first flyball tournament.

**Where:** Alaska State Fairgrounds in Palmer; purple gate; free admission.

**When:** Races are scheduled for 10 a.m., 11 a.m., noon, 2 p.m. and 3 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday.

ing races on Wednesday included a lot of ups and downs for his team, and the little dog's new bad habit was one of the downs.

However, he said, Wednesday marked the first time many of the Alaska team dogs had raced in a competition setting, so he had expected some problems. He was happy his team had some races come in under 24 seconds, he said, and he was particularly pleased that the tournament attracted some of his former flyball comrades from North Carolina as well as a team from Saskatchewan, Canada.

The Alaska team won at least one heat on Wednesday, coming in at 23.518 seconds to the other team's 23.641.

While flyball is a competitive sport, Smith said the ultimate goal is to have fun.

Smith said he hopes more flyball teams will start in Alaska, which would allow the state to host more tournaments. For more information about flyball and the Alaska Dogs Gone Wild flyball team, go to [www.flyballdogs.com/alaska](http://www.flyballdogs.com/alaska).

Contact Leila Kheiry at 352-2270 or at [leila.kheiry@frontiersman.com](mailto:leila.kheiry@frontiersman.com)