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Dogs and humans alike love fast, furious sport

It's not just the owners who enjoy the thrill of competitive flyball — the four-legged athletes excel at high-speed game of fetch.

By Caitlin McIntyre
The Guardian

Flyball is the high-energy sport played by furry, four-legged athletes, and it's becoming increasingly popular in Charlottetown.



Forrest Beaton of Cornwall and his Boston terrier TKO competed in the Dogfathers of Confederation flyball tournament at the Charlottetown Civic Centre over the Canada Day weekend. (GUARDIAN PHOTO BY CAITLIN MCINTYRE)

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Flyball is a team sport and each team consists of four dogs and their handlers.

Two teams compete against each other in a relay race in which the dogs jump over four hurdles on a 51-foot track.

At the end of the track is a spring-loaded box that releases a tennis ball, which the dogs carry as they race back another 51 feet to the finish line.

In fact, flyball is one of the fastest-growing canine sports in North America, and one of the few sports played by both owners and their pets.

The Charlottetown club Fast 'n' Furious Flyball hosted their annual Dogfathers of Confederation flyball tournament over the Canada Day weekend at the Charlottetown Civic Centre, and emotions were running high.

The 24 teams from the Atlantic region, Ontario, Maine and New York in attendance, along with their pets, provided plenty of excitement and energy over the weekend.

"It's a relay race, a game of fetch, played at very high speed," said Charlottetown resident Mike Devine, chairperson of Fast 'n' Furious

and director of the tournament.

"It's also a great opportunity to interact with your family pet. The dogs feel a love of interaction with their owners, and it's a real chance to bond."

Many of the dogs trained for the sport are rescued from humane societies, he said.

Most dogs can take part in flyball after 12-16 weeks of professional training, and the sport can be played by any breed.

However, border collies tend to excel at flyball due to their drive and trainability.

Fast 'n' Furious has had a number of successes recently, and the team Devine coaches captured the Atlantic Canada regional championship title for the past six years in

a row.

Of course, it's not just the owners enjoying the thrill of competitive flyball.

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Judging by the manic tail-wagging and frantic barking at the Civic Centre last weekend, the dogs seem to love the sport too.

"A lot of dogs need that activity to keep them focused," Devine said.

"A lot of high-performance dogs need the physical exertion to keep them stimulated. We're adding value to our dogs' lives by giving them an opportunity to enjoy a physical competition and to just go out there and socialize. "

Laura Brehaut of Stratford said many people have misconceptions about the sport. For instance, she said many assume dogs who compete in flyball tournaments must be "out of control" or overly energetic.

But Brehaut insists the competitions can help the dogs become better pets.

"They know that type of behaviour is in this setting, and because they have an outlet for their energy and their drive then they're quieter at home," she said.

Brehaut, who handled a Jack Russell terrier named Envy during the Charlottetown tournament, said the pride and satisfaction the dogs get from competing makes flyball a worthwhile sport for owners and their pets.

"I've done obedience training, parades, and pet therapy, and there's nothing that beats this for fun," she said.

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