

The fast and the furry

Speedy canines will race, leap and catch like crazy at flyball tourney

BY ERIN CHAN | FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER



Inside a white and gray building in Davisburg, dogs hurtle down strips of cushioned mats, bounding so fast over obstacles they look like furry pinballs unleashed in some kind of frenetic game.

A cacophony of constant yips and barks provides a delightful, if near-deafening, soundtrack.

Human voices and hand claps accompany the barking, brimming with encouraging words: "Good boy! That's it, girl!"

This is a game.

But it's also how two-legged moms and dads bond with their hyped-up, four-legged children.

This is flyball.

The term "fly ball" is associated with baseball more than a bevy of enthusiastic canines. But "flyball," the dog-based activity, has gained a large and passionate following in southeast Michigan. It's akin to drag racing with dogs: Flyball teams consist of four pooches that take turns racing down a there-and-back course while hurdling jumps and catching tennis balls.

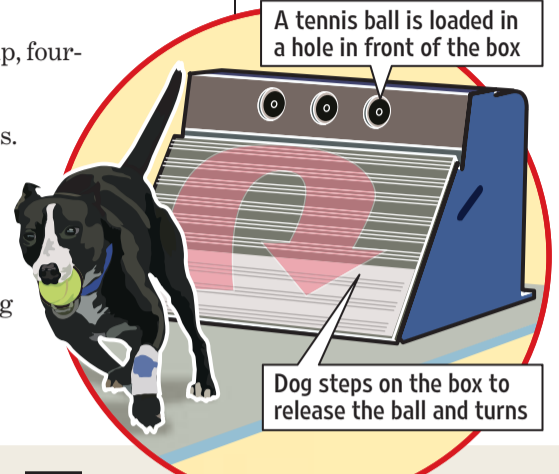
The latest regional flyball tournament begins today at the Rock Financial Showplace in Novi in conjunction with the United Kennel Club's Metro Mid-Winter Classic Dog Show. A second and larger tournament runs during the show Saturday and Sunday.

See FLYBALL, 5F

Novi flyball tournaments

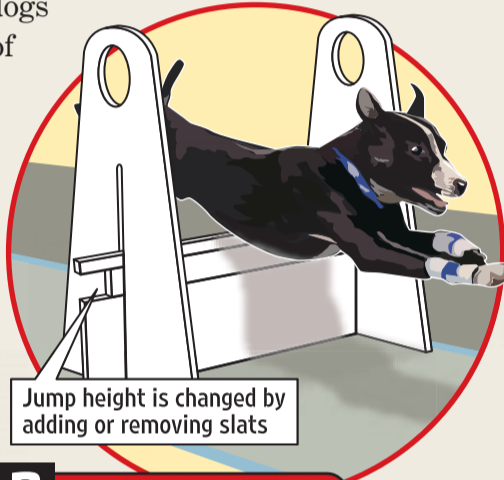
Held during the United Kennel Club's Metro Mid-Winter Classic Dog Show
10 a.m.-5 p.m. Fri.,
10 a.m.-5 p.m. Sat. & Sun.
Rock Financial Showplace,
46100 Grand River in Novi
\$10 adults; \$7 for seniors 65 and older and kids 11 and younger (includes admission to flyball tournament and dog show); \$25 for a family pack, which includes admission for two adults and two kids
\$5 for parking
Please leave your dog at home.
269-343-9020
www.ukcdogs.com

For more information about the North American Flyball Association, check out www.flyball.org.



FOUR FAST DOGS ON A MISSION

Flyball is a relay race for dogs. Four dogs take turns running 51 feet over a set of four hurdles, retrieving a tennis ball from a spring-loaded box and returning to the start/finish line. Their object is to do it faster than the opposing team on an adjacent racing lane. Races are broken down to heats. The first team that wins three of five heats wins the race. Here are some key components of flyball racing:

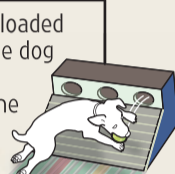


2 THE JUMPS

Dogs jump four hurdles that are spaced 10 feet apart. The jump height is 4 inches below the shoulder height of the shortest dog on each team. The minimum height is 7 inches; maximum is 16 inches.

3 THE FLYBALL BOX & TURN

A tennis ball is loaded into a spring-loaded flyball box at the end of the lane. The dog steps on the front of the box which launches the ball. The dog catches the ball and carries it back over the jumps. The dog pushes off of the flyball box to turn around quickly. Some dogs may do a swimmer's turn.



WINNING LOCAL TEAM'S WORLD RECORDS

- Spring Loaded, regular team (made up of any pure or mixed breed dogs): 15.22 seconds
- Spring Loaded, multi-breed team (made up of four to six different breeds): 15.36 seconds

MORE POINTERS

- What kind of dogs play flyball? Any dog can learn to play flyball. Some breeds, such as Border collies, Australian shepherds, shelties and Jack Russell terriers, do better than others. Many mixed breeds are great competitors.
- How fast are they? Team speeds vary, so they are divided into divisions based on their speed. The fastest teams, in Division 1, can run the course in about 16 seconds (that's 4 seconds per dog). Average speed teams run the course in under 20 seconds.



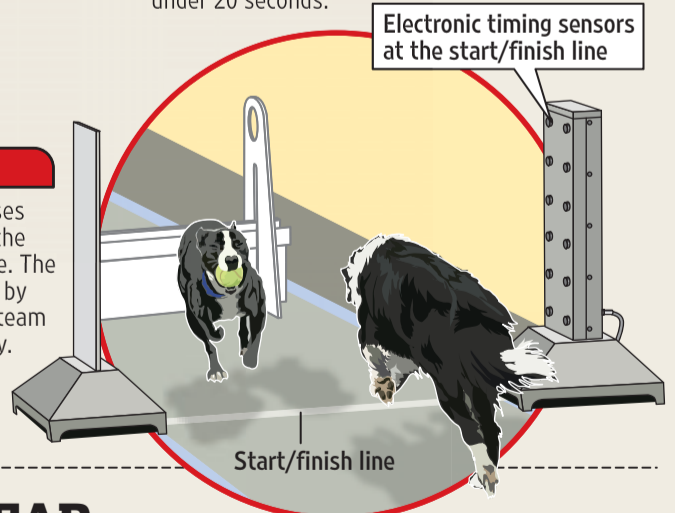
1 THE START

Timing lights — similar to the ones used in drag racing — help the handler to release the dog and break the sensor beam at the start/finish line at the right time. If a dog starts too early, it is a false start and it must begin the heat again.

Start/finish line

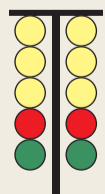
4 THE PASS

As each dog returns, it passes the next dog running from the team at the start/finish line. The dogs are clocked separately by the timing system and the team total is tallied automatically.



TIMING LIGHTS

Lights flash down from yellow to red to green for handlers to time their release of the dog.



HEAD TO HEAD

Two teams square off at a competition. An electronic judging system is used to time starts, passes, finishes, and individual dogs' times to the thousandth of a second.

