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The fast and the furry

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

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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.

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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.

Flyball has taken hold of the region's dog lovers, who often haul motor homes and RVs to camp at tournament sites. According to Michelle Koons and Sheri Zamonski of flyball club On the Rebound, host of this weekend's tournament, about 50 teams have signed up, most from southeast Michigan.

Lee Heighton, 45, a member of the Spring Loaded flyball team and chair of the board of directors for the North American Flyball Association, attributes the sport's regional popularity to flyball's origins. Though it is believed to have first appeared in California in the early 1970s, flyball in its most organized form started among dog lovers in Detroit and Ontario in the early 1980s.

The author of the Flyball Association's first rule book, Mike Randall, lived around Ann Arbor and ran his dogs with a team called Fronrunners, notes Lorel Bradshaw, 51, of Ypsilanti, herself a member of the Fronrunners squad.

In addition, a flyball club called Spring Loaded, most of whose members live in Michigan, hold the world records in both major flyball categories -- regular (any four dogs) and multi-breed (a mixture of four different types of dogs) -- with times of 15.22 seconds and 15.36 seconds, respectively.

Mind you, this is around 15 seconds for a team of four dogs, which means each dog took just a little more than 3 seconds to run a total of 102 feet, jump over eight hurdles and catch a tennis ball in its mouth.

PHOTOS

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(KIMBERLY P. MITCHELL/Detroit Free Press)

A competitor named Peeler practices ball retrieval at the Springfield Oaks Activity Center in Davisburg.

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Pretty darn fast, isn't it?

A flyball team completes a run when each of four dogs has jumped over four hurdles, hit a spring-loaded box, caught a tennis ball in its mouth and raced back over the hurdles. Most regional races feature two teams running head to head, with the winner taking the best of five runs. In two-day tournaments, the teams in each division often race each other round robin-style the first day and in elimination rounds the second.

For fairness, the divisions of five or six teams each are grouped by an estimated time submitted by each team. Still, when the starting lights begin flashing, there's an undeniable drive to beat the team next to you.

"I like doing things with my dogs and being competitive," says Craig Knowles, 39, of Monroe, a member of Spring Loaded whose dogs, Peeler and Smack, will run in the Novi tournament. "I thought, 'I'm getting older, and I can't compete as much, so maybe I'll put it onto my dogs.' "

Super-fast teams like Spring Loaded tend to run dogs like Border collies, which, as herding dogs, have an innate sense of drive and competition.

Others like Fuzzy Lightning, whose dogs tend to run in the slowest division -- about six seconds behind Spring Loaded -- have a more diverse mix of breeds. Its team captain, Christine Kloski, 59, of Fraser, says the club has just one Border collie. Kloski and her husband, Bill, race an Australian shepherd, a Jack Russell terrier and a papillon.

Fast or slow, most flyball clubs are in it for the love of their pets.

"We get no money," says Lynn Lico, 38, of White Lake, a member of Spring Loaded, which, in addition to holding world records, is also the Flyball Association and Cynosports world champion. "A stuffed toy as a prize is usually the best you can get.

"That's the real essence of the whole game: You spend the weekend with a group of people you like, having fun. It doesn't matter if you're world champions or not. You love the game. You love playing with your dogs. That's the reward."

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