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This page, clockwise, top left: Dogs zoom over hurdle jumps to the flyball box; Border Collies demonstrate the efficient "swimmer's turn;" teammates pass each other as one dog finishes and another begins; pushing off of the box gives this dog more speed on the return.

1984 and had 12 teams. The first executive director, Mike Randall, wrote the first NAFA rulebook in 1985 and really helped the sport organize and grow in the mid-'80s." Last year, 8,434 teams representing 359 different NAFA clubs participated in tournaments in the United States and Canada.

United Flyball League International (U-FLI) was founded in 2005. "We founded U-FLI to promote family involvement and our great junior handler program," says U-FLI CEO Terri May of Clovis, California. "We have seen tremendous growth in the first year, and currently have 114 clubs with more than 1,400 dogs."

Regardless of organizational focus, all flyball competitions provide participants with a huge adrenaline rush. In a race, the dog must cross the start line and jump over four hurdles to the box. He must jump on the box to trigger the release of the ball and—ball in mouth—return over the four hurdles and cross the finish line. On the way back, the owner shouts encouragement and usually dangles a fleece tug toy, which serves as the reward for the dog once he finishes.

The Team

In NAFA, the minimum jump height is 8 inches and the maximum is 16 inches. Dogs are measured from the withers to the floor. The height of the hurdles is determined by the height of the shortest dog on the team. That dog is called the "height dog," and every team wants one to give them an advantage.

In U-FLI, the minimum jump height is 6 inches and the maximum is 12 inches. "With U-FLI, a lot of dogs can be a height dog because we have an innovative way of measuring dogs," says May. "We measure from the elbow to the stopper pad [wrist] and that measurement is converted to the jump height. It's fast, efficient and fair."

The first dog to run is the "start dog." Typically, he is bursting with energy and will push off hard. The second and third dogs are the "team dogs." The "anchor dog" is last, and is eager to close the gap if the other team's dog is running ahead. You might say the anchor dog likes to work under pressure.

In a flyball tournament, in addition to earning points and titles, teams compete against one another for placement in their division. A race usually comprises three to five heats. There are two racing lanes—one per team—and five judges: two line judges, two box judges and one head judge.

The head judge keeps an eye on both lanes and announces the winner. Paul Ferlitto of Wilsonville, Alabama, is a renowned and well-respected judge for NAFA and U-FLI, as well as the owner of the Gamblers Flyball Racing Team. As head judge, Ferlitto likes to be positioned about 40 feet behind the start line. "I'm comfortable there, and it gives me the best view. I can see when dogs are running back if they cross over [into the other lane] and interfere with another dog."

Traffic Patterns

When training your dog for flyball, the successful passing of another dog is crucial. The dog must be confident and stay on his side of his team's lane. For a racing "traffic pattern," the dog sprints down the lane on the right-hand side and must return on the left-hand side. That doesn't sound too difficult until you realize that the lane is only four feet wide. The dogs pass within inches of each other, and the fact that so many of them do this, and do it well, is a tribute to their excellent training and focus.

It helps if your dog loves balls and is a natural jumper, but with some training, just about any dog can do it. "There is a process to go through," says Cheryl Killam of Raymond, New Hampshire. Cheryl, her 16-year-old son, Aaron Hunt, and their three miniature Australian Shepherds are members of White Mountain Mayhem

Photography: Christina Davis, top row above; Todd Minnella, bottom row above; Matt Allison, opposite page.







This page, clockwise, top left: The handler restrains the dog, revving him up for the race; Terriers often serve as "height dogs" on a team because the smallest dog determines the height of the jumps; it's not unusual to see mixed breeds or "All-Americans" successfully compete in flyball.

Flyball Team.

"First, you must have a fabulous recall," says Killam. "We would sit at the far end of the kitchen and throw the ball into the mudroom so it would bounce off the door. Then we'd send the dog to get the ball. Your dog needs to understand that term, 'get the ball.' You can do it in the yard, inside, anywhere."

Killam also says that when the dog gets the ball, you can observe which direction he naturally turns. This helps determine the placement of the ball in the flyball box. Dogs who are inclined to turn left will see the ball shoot out of a hole on the left, and dogs who prefer to turn right will see the ball shoot out of the right side. (The flyball box doesn't magically know how many balls to load or where to place them for release. That's the responsibility of the box loader, who stands behind the box, facing the oncoming dogs. He or she must know each dog by name as well as their respective preferences, know the running order and load the balls accordingly. The box loader also provides verbal encouragement for each dog.)

Once your dog consistently comes when called and is comfortable jumping, the next step is teaching the box turn, or "swimmer's turn." As Aaron Hunt explains, "The dog runs up the box and turns so his body is sideways, parallel with the floor, then pushes off of the box. This way, he keeps the speed." Doing a proper box turn also promotes safety, because the dog isn't constantly jamming his shoulders when he hits the box, or abruptly twisting and turning for the return back down the lane.

"An experienced person can make handling look so easy, so fluid," says May. "When you go to do it yourself, there is so much to think about. When do I release my dog? When do I call my dog?"

An Equal Opportunity Sport

The flyball community embraces newcomers, so if you go to the websites for NAFA and U-FLI (see Resources) and search for clubs/teams in your area, you'll soon find enthusiastic mentors.

Another positive is that all dogs, purebred or mixed, are eligible to participate in either organization. NAFA's Ford says that in 2005, 5,415 active dogs represented 146 different breeds, with an additional 994 mixed-breeds. U-FLI's May says there are about 400 rescue dogs registered with her organization.

Age doesn't matter, either. "A dog recently came out to our practice who was four years old and never had any training," says May. "A dog is never too old to learn, and doesn't have to be a specific breed. If people invest the time, they will receive the benefits. It takes time to train your dog and learn the sport, but it's so enjoyable. The whole family can participate, and it's fun traveling to new places and making new friends."

The Beane family of San Marcos, California, can attest to that. It all started innocently enough when Bob and Pam Beane saw a flyball demo at a county fair almost six years ago and thought it looked like fun. At the time, they had one dog, a Labrador Retriever named Rocky who loved balls. Today, the pack has grown to six dogs. Bob does box-loader duty, and Pam and her three daughters—15-year-old Heather, 14-year-old Holly and 11-year-old Hope—all compete in flyball with Catchers on the Fly.

"We all enjoy our dogs and spend more time together," says Pam. "You teach your children how to be [part of] a team. And you teach them about wins and losses. It's a wonderful way to teach children about life. Our dogs are all better behaved and look forward to that one-on-one time." Adds Pam, "If we didn't do flyball, we'd still have a bond, but this is a different kind, a working relationship. They are like your best friends—they know what you're thinking."

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FLYBALL RESOURCES

Books

Flyball Racing: The Dog Sport for Everyone (Howell Book House), by Lonnie Olson

Jumping From A to Z: Teach Your Dog to Soar (Canine Sports Productions), by M. Christine Zink, DVM, PhD, and Julie Daniels

Let's Play Flyball! (DuckWare), by Cathy Consla & Coleen Mrakovich

Magazines

Dog & Handler
www.dogandhandler.com
InsideFlyball.com (online magazine)
www.insideflyball.com

Organizations

North American Flyball Association (NAFA)
www.flyball.org

United Flyball League International (U-FLI)
www.u-fli.com

Flyball enthusiast Christine Davis of San Diego, California, says it's the handler-dog bond that inspired her to found her e-magazine, InsideFlyball.com, last year. "There are some amazing stories," says Davis, "like the emaciated dog who was found chained to a tree and was rescued and went on to be one of the top dogs in flyball. In general, people are becoming more educated and seeing that their dogs are valuable members of the family who like to have something to do."

Whether your dog is a ball fiend or a couch potato, flyball is a wonderful way to spend some quality time with your canine companion. Lee Heighton of Casco, Michigan, whose team Spring Loaded is the reigning NAFA world record holder at 15.22 seconds, would be the first to tell you that your dog is what matters most.

"One of the best things [about flyball] is that it's open to all dogs," says Heighton. "It doesn't matter what breed you have or how fast your dog is. Just take your time and have fun."