



Riley, a bichon frise, takes off!

*The competitors crouch, muscles tensed. The lights count down...ready...set...GO!!!!*

Legs churning, two athletes charge up the course. They bound over one jump, two, three, and then four. Doing a swimmer's turn off a slant-faced box, each catches the ball that shoots out, then turns to race back down its lane. As each crosses the finish line, the next in the relay passes, until all four racers on each team have gone.

Is this some obscure track and field event? No, the sport is called flyball, and the athletes are dogs. Legend has it that flyball was introduced to the world by a man named Herbert Wagner, who did a demo on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson in the late 1970s. The sport was based on a combination of scent discrimination (where a dog retrieves one particular item out of many) and hurdle racing. Eventually a mechanical apparatus (known as a "flyball box") was developed to launch tennis balls for the dogs to retrieve and carry back over the hurdles. Early flyball boxes used empty tuna cans mounted on catapults and cost less than a hundred dollars to build. The current top-of-the-line box is made of high-density plastic with sophisticated metal launch mechanisms and costs thousands.

Flyball clubs were first organized in the Toronto-Detroit area, with the inaugural tournament being held in 1983. Since then, the sport has grown tremendously, not just in the USA, but around the world. There are active flyball teams in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Finland, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa and the United Kingdom, and flyball training has been introduced to dog clubs in Japan. There are two bodies that sanction flyball competitions in the U.S. and Canada: NAFA® (North American Flyball Association, [www.flyball.org](http://www.flyball.org)), now celebrating its twentieth year, and U-FLI™ (United Flyball League International, [www.u-fli.com](http://www.u-fli.com)), founded in

## FLYBALL: The Best Kept Dog Sport Secret

By Dede Crough

2005. There are more than 16,000 dogs in the U.S. and Canada registered with NAFA and more than 1500 registered with U-FLI.



Ola returns with her ball as Hershey passes on the way to the box. Both are rescued mixed breeds.

The flyball race format comprises two teams running a number of heats side by side in separate lanes. The fifty one-foot course consists of a start line, which is six feet from the first jump, four jumps spaced ten feet apart and the flyball box, which is fifteen feet from the fourth jump. The first team to have all four dogs complete their runs without errors wins the heat. Jump heights are determined by the height of the shortest dog on the team. Spring Loaded (a Michigan-based club) set the current world record time of 15.22 seconds on July 16, 2005.

After reading all that, you're probably wondering what kind of dogs play flyball. The answer is any dog can play, but not every dog. Flyball competitors range in size from miniature dachshunds, who are shorter than the jumps, to great danes, from border collies and whippets who can complete the course well under four seconds, to basset hounds who might need eleven seconds. Mixed breed dogs are just as welcome as purebreds.

The only restriction on a dog being eligible to participate in a tournament is that it must be at least one year old. However, dogs who play flyball must be able to focus amidst a lot of distractions, and must have good temperament that they can share a limited amount of racing space in a very exciting environment with several other dogs and people without getting stressed out. Not all dogs can do that.

A typical fly ball team is three border collies (fast dogs) and a Jack Russell terrier (short dog to keep the jump height low). But there are plenty of teams that don't have any border collies on them. NAFAD developed two separate classes of racing to encourage people to race dogs other than the usual types. One is Regular, in which any four dogs can run together. The other is Multi-breed, in which all four dogs running have to be different breeds (or one can be a mixed breed). Thus you might have a Multi-breed team of a border collie, golden retriever, hound dog mix, and miniature poodle.

One of the beauties of the sport is that racing divisions are determined by seed times. It would be no fun for either group to pit a team that regularly clocks twenty three seconds against one that reliably breaks eighteen. Within the divisions, teams with similar ability compete against each other, and therefore have an even chance to earn blue ribbons.

*The author and Hershey, a rescued mixed breed, wait for the start.*



*Ola, a rescued mixed breed, demonstrates how to fly with a ball.*

Another beauty of flyball is that it is the only true team sport for dogs. You cannot race flyball with just you and your dog; you need to work with other people and their dogs to be successful together. So now you want to know if you can try flyball with your dog, right? First and foremost, to train for any sport, your dog should be in good health, including being at an appropriate weight in decent condition. In flyball, dogs are running, jumping and landing on the flyball box at top speeds, and that puts a lot of stress on their bodies. They can run 35-40 heats in the course of a tournament weekend! Secondly, your dog should be friendly towards other dogs and people. Finally, it helps if your dog has completed at least basic obedience training, as most flyball training is done off leash.

There are several teams in the Greater Philadelphia area. Release The Hounds, Fur Fun, Balls to the Wall and Philadelphia Bark-ing Authority all train at Y2K9s, a dog sports club located in Wyndmooor, PA ([www.y2k9s.net](http://www.y2k9s.net)).

Members of Release The Hounds currently teach flyball at Canine Creature Comforts in Malvern, PA ([www.caninecreaturecomforts.com](http://www.caninecreaturecomforts.com)). Other area facilities that sometimes offer flyball classes are Y2K9s (check the "Class Schedule" page of the website to see if it's going to be offered for the coming term), the Dog Training Club of Chester County in Exton, PA ([www.dtccc.org](http://www.dtccc.org)) and Wonder Dogs in Berlin, NJ ([www.wonderdogs.com](http://www.wonderdogs.com)).

Dede Crough is the owner of Give A Dog A Break (a dog walking/puppy training/ pet sitting business) in Glen Moore, PA (north eastern Chester County), and started training flyball with her dog Hershey in 2001. They are founding members of Release The Hounds. Dede also is a member of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers, the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants, and serves on the Board of Directors for Y2K9s. She can be reached at [dede@giveadogabreak.com](mailto:dede@giveadogabreak.com).