

In the fast lane

BY LISA HANKS

Could your dog be a flyball star? Check it out.

How did a tiny, 15-pound Danish-Swedish Farmdog named Anna become the United Flyball League International's top-titled and top-point-earning competitor four years in a row?

"Anna's extremely focused on her job," says owner Sally Frankel of Long Beach, Calif. "She's dependable with tons of stamina, and is small, agile, and speedy."

Five-year-old Anna, a Flyball Master, was awarded the U-FLI Top Flight Champion plaque in January 2009 for earning 50,000 points — the only dog to do so thus far — and is on her way to shattering more records.

Anna is lucky to have the elements necessary to be an excellent flyball dog. Her balanced structure and musculature assist in acceleration, quick turns, as well as repeated jumps. She also loves to race, jump, play with toys, and interact with other dogs and people. In addition, she is confident, intelligent, energetic, and eager to try new things, work hard, and please her owner.

In terms of structure, the best flyball dog is typically a medium-sized, nimble dog who can easily sprint through the four-jump course. She must also be able to perform a swimmer's turn — using all four feet in a 180-degree about-face — off the small box at the end of the 51-foot track, grab the ball ejected from the box, and race back down the course, so her teammate can run the next leg of the relay.

Anna, of course, is an exception to the rule. She speeds through the course despite her small frame, and acts as a "height dog," lowering the jumps for her four dog-and-person team to the minimum height.

According to Frankel, about 85 percent of dogs who are good at flyball are rescue dogs. "People give them up because they tear up their houses and yards, and are



Anna in action.

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always into things," Frankel says. "Basically, they're good dogs that need a job. When flyball becomes their job, they become better pets."

Working with a solid, well-matched team is critical to success — whether your goal is to run a couple tournaments for fun or to compete in national tournaments for top honors.

"Find a team that shares the same level of racing desire as you and is willing to teach new dogs and people," says Frankel, who travels 100 miles to work with her team once a week. "I was fortunate to have a fellow teammate as my mentor when I was training Anna."

Most dogs need one and a half to two years of training to become good flyballers; some take as long as five. Training should include conditioning, teamwork, passing other racers, and the all-important box turn.

Your and your dog's skills will improve if you recruit a training partner and an experienced mentor or trainer. "Look for a trainer who knows dogs, as well as the latest tools for training flyball," Frankel says.



Anna on the run.

Try attending several tournaments and asking questions. The atmosphere is typically welcoming. "Flyball is referred to as the 'beer and chips' of canine sports," Frankel says. "Flyball people are very friendly and helpful to newcomers. You'll see campsites of teams enjoying food, laughing together, strategizing their next races, and playing with their dogs."

Stay positive and patient, and reward your dog for doing well. "Have fun," Frankel says. "Enjoy the time you have with your dog, keep Band-Aids close at hand, and laugh a lot!" □

Lisa Hanks is a freelance writer in Southern California and the former editor of BowTie Magazines' Popular Dogs Series.

Next month: Exercise returns with tips on kayaking with your dog.