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Four left feet? Not for these dancers

In canine freestyle, dog owners eschew foxtrot for houndtrot

By JENNIFER WILLIS Issue date: Tue, Jun 6, 2006
The Tribune

When a friend gave her a videotape of “Dancing With Your Dog,” Corvallis dog obedience trainer Julie Flanery thought it was a joke.

Then she saw a live canine freestyle demonstration and decided to give it a whirl. With no local trainers available, Flanery watched videos, taught her own dog and began offering classes to others. Eventually, she founded Dogs Gone Dancin’ — now the largest freestyle club on the West Coast, with more than 30 members in Oregon and Washington.

Most people have never heard of canine freestyle — in which a costumed trainer and dog “dance” together in choreography set to music — though they may have seen it via the Internet “viral video” of a woman dancing with her golden retriever to “You’re the One That I Want,” from “Grease.”

Here in dog-friendly Oregon, interest in freestyle is growing fast. Brigitte Sclabas, who’s danced with dogs for eight years, teaches freestyle at Pup-A-Razzi in Beaverton and Dog Days in Vancouver, Wash. A native of Switzerland, she also started freestyle after seeing videos.

She befriended trainers Richard Curtis (of the United Kingdom) and Carolyn Scott (the Texas trainer in the online video). “I just learned everything I needed from them: how to keep it upbeat, how to motivate the dog, how to have fun,” she says.

Blame Canada

Originating in Canada in the late 1980s, this combination of obedience training and choreography still is relatively new in the United States. Some organizations require basic moves for competition, but the main focus is the individual dog’s natural abilities. “You see what they’re capable of,” Sclabas explains. Often, she says, “you would have never thought that they could do that.”

Shy dogs bloom in freestyle. Mimi, a 2-year-old miniature poodle and one of Sclabas’ main working dogs, was very withdrawn as a puppy but shines in freestyle, doing high jumps and midair turns, weaving through Sclabas’ legs, and leaping through a “hoop” Sclabas makes with her arms. “She’s a showgirl,” Sclabas says.

Finding a place to teach in metro Portland was easy for Sclabas. “There were already a lot of people around who wanted to do it. They were just waiting for an opportunity.”

One student-in-waiting was Liz Schweiker, who takes Sclabas’ class at Pup-A-Razzi. After several years of competitive obedience training with her golden retriever, Emma, she saw an ad for a freestyle seminar.



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She and Emma were quickly hooked.

Emma’s structural problems prevent agility training, and Schweiker says Emma was “a little bored with obedience. She says to me, ‘Well, I sat. I stayed. What more do you want?’ ” The variety of movement and upbeat attitude of freestyle keep Emma interested.

While Schweiker admits that freestyle is a challenge, she says, “the best part is having fun” with Emma. Flanery, who was named 2001 World Canine Freestyle Organization Trainer of the Year, agrees. She calls it “almost like an addiction ... the most enjoyable and, in many ways, the most difficult dog activity I’ve ever done.”

Sclabas’ classes at Dog Days are \$100 for six weekly sessions, and \$90 to \$120 for six weeks at Pup-A-Razzi.

While basic obedience is a pre-requisite for freestyle, teaching a dog to dance is simply a matter of getting it to follow food. Students lure their dogs through increasingly complex moves with lots of treats. “Always find something your dog likes,” Sclabas advises. “It’s really good to have something special; some dogs work more for toys.”

Susan Fletcher, who takes Sclabas’ Dog Days class, rewards her dog Paco with meat, cheese and jerky. “I think he likes the spinning a lot. ... He likes it when we go fast,” she says.

Picking a tune for Toto

Finding the right music is key. “You choose music that fits the dog,” Sclabas says. “If you have a goofy, funny dog ... look for goofy, funny music. If you have a serious working dog, you wouldn’t choose anything that’s really prissy.”

At a recent Dog Days class, Sclabas taught choreography to the disco beat of “Shake Your Groove Thing.”

Though many come to freestyle class to do something fun and engaging with their dogs, others have an eye toward competition. “I’m not going through all this work and (not show) everybody what this little dog can do,” Schweiker says of Emma. “I don’t want to just keep it confined to my living room.”

In 2000, the first West Coast freestyle competition hosted only nine participants, but at this year’s WCFO titling event in Corvallis, there were 60 entrants.

The WCFO also has classes for senior dogs and owners and those with disabilities. There’s no minimum age, and Sclabas has started some of her dogs as early as 5 weeks old.

Unlike other dog sports, freestyle is open to dogs of all breeds — including mixed breeds. “I love mutts,” Sclabas says. “Often they are so unique in what they do and how they look, and you can just showcase that in freestyle.”

Many people don’t expect to be moved by freestyle dog dancing, but the WCFO gives the “Wettest Hanky Award” to the most engaging performance, with spectators and competitors often laughing and crying through the dances. When she goes to WCFO events, Flanery’s only requirement is that “they must have Kleenex for me at the table.”

“I don’t get my dogs for dog sport. I get my dogs because I love dogs. They’re my family, and my hobby, and my passion, and everything!” Sclabas says. Although her husband will relocate to Nashville midsummer, Sclabas will remain in Portland through November — to keep training and to find a replacement instructor for when she leaves.

Competitors and amateurs agree that doing freestyle helps build the relationship between dog and human. “You get a good connection with the dog when you work with them,” Sclabas says. “You give them something that they enjoy. They love you for that. That’s why I’m doing freestyle. We have something that we enjoy together.”



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