



Catching a Frisbee, or disc, is hard enough. Try running at full speed, leaping and then snagging it in midair with your mouth. That is the essence of the sport known as disc dogs, but local sports-dogs Oscar, Rigby, Harley Sue, Towser and Killian handle this challenge with grace and a bit of well-deserved tail-swaggering.

Disc-dog competitions typically involve a main event—the throw-and-catch portion where points accumulate depending on how often and how far the Frisbee flies before the dog catches it—as well as a freestyle section in which human-canine combos dazzle judges with a barrage of incredible tricks and creative catches. Lawrence hosts a smaller competition that coincides with Art in the Park every May, as well as one of the major competitions, The Land of Oz Quadruped, in June.

None of it—the competitions or the sport itself—would be possible without the mutual exchange of athleticism, dedication, trust, time and love between the humans and dogs.

BRYCE OSTROM

WITH OSCAR AND RIGBY

“There’s a lot going on,” says Bryce Ostrom, who competes with Oscar and Rigby. “It’s good mind and body exercise for the dogs and the humans.”

For dogs, the 20 minutes of catching Frisbees equals about a 90-minute walk, but the sport is more than hurling, jumping and catching. Owners accumulate countless separate solo and pooch practice hours. Ostrom practices throwing more than his hounds do catching.

“It’s less exhausting if you can put the Frisbee in the right spot for them,” says Ostrom. “It’s quality practice, not quantity practice.”

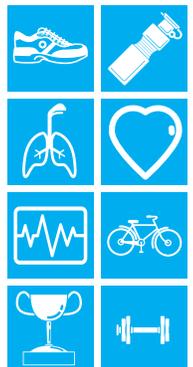
Strength and conditioning exercises can be as elaborate and creative as some of the routines and tricks. A contraption put together by Ostrom includes a bucket and a stability ball so that his dogs can strengthen stabilizer muscles, receive some cross-training and be stimulated during winter months.

Ostrom, a University of Kansas theater and film graduate, trains himself and his canines like seasoned athletes, with the work resulting in numerous medals and awards. But his main intent is simple. “If you take it too seriously, your dog’s going to lose interest, espe-

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BOLD DOGS CHEW FLICKS

Diving dogs and hurling humans team up in this sport of spectacular leaps and snatches



cially when they're engaged and revved up and having fun," says Ostrom. "They key into that nervousness and feeling pressure and stuff. That's the number one rule in doing Frisbee dog stuff competitively: Keep it light and have fun.

"You may have driven 12 hours to Louisville, Kentucky, to play Frisbee for a weekend with your dog, but for your dog it's no different than the backyard," says Ostrom. "As far as he's concerned, you're just playing."

ANN WILHELM WITH HARLEY SUE

Like many athletes, Harley Sue has a day job. On the clock, she accompanies special education teacher Ann Wilhelm to Shawnee Heights High School and works with teenagers who have Down syndrome, autism and Asperger's.

"When I got her, I found out that she was super, super good with people and had a wonderful personality, so I actually started training her first to be a service dog in my classroom," says Wilhelm.

The sport came later, after Wilhelm watched a disc-dog competition on television and became intrigued. She likes the sport because it appeals to her competitive nature and gives her quality time with Harley Sue.

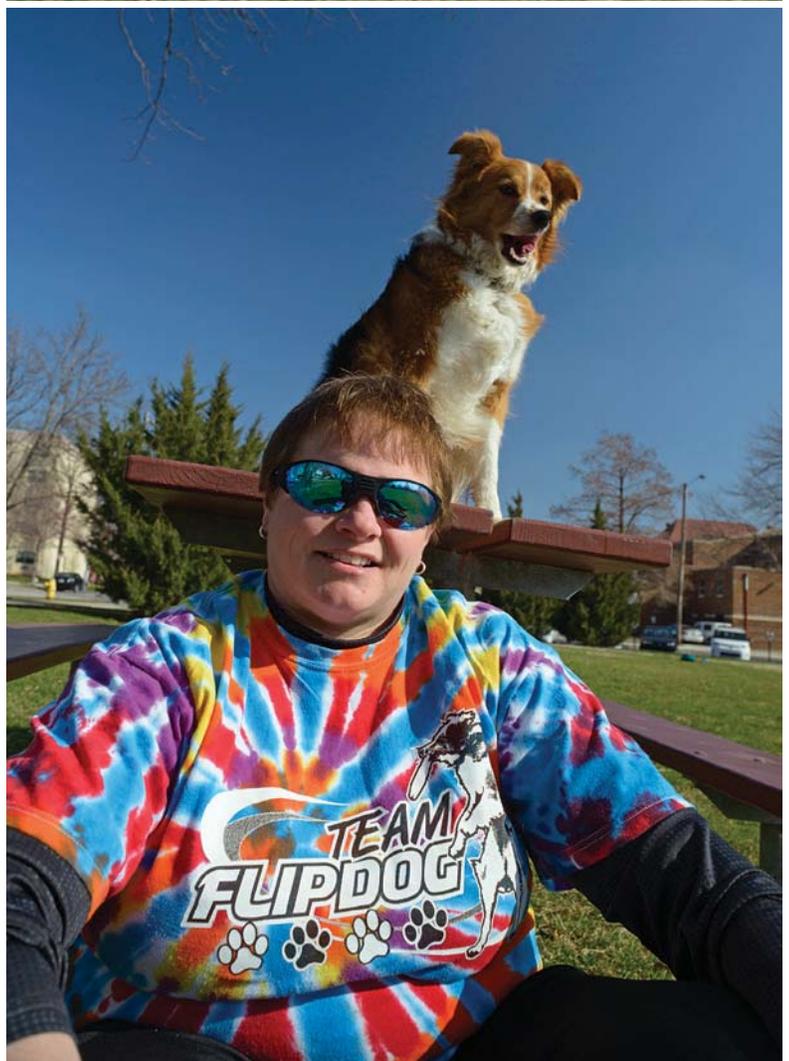
"I just enjoy spending a lot of time with her," says Wilhelm. "She is constantly wanting to please me to figure out what I want her to do, which is really helpful when I'm teaching her new tricks and things to do."

Wilhelm's not just teaching her tricks. Currently, she's working to improve Harley Sue's level of conditioning too.

"What I'm trying to do now is take her biking with me to build up her endurance, because I think when it's super-hot outside it's actually going to help her to have more stamina longer," says Wilhelm. "Her endurance and her speed have actually increased because I'm now not just working on short stints with her, I'm working on the longer running with her too."

For Wilhelm, the process of discovering Harley Sue's hidden talents represents the best aspects of the sport. "These dogs are super-talented. It just takes somebody loving them and spending time with them and seeing what they can accomplish," she says.

One thing that has also changed over time is Harley Sue's name. A Boy Named Sue she is not. Harley Sue started out as Harley when she was adopted as a rescue dog. Wilhelm later added "Sue" to the name after people continually inquired about the dog's gender. In disc-dog competition, however, the gender distinction is irrelevant—dogs compete in categories, but are divided only into novice, intermediate and advanced levels. A few contests also include micro-divisions for dogs under 25 pounds, but mostly it's the boys versus the girls and the Chihuahuas against the mastiffs in open competition.



JEFF SCHEETZ WITH TOWSER

Rescue. Rescue. Rescue. That's the mantra of Jeff Scheetz, president of Kansas City Disc Dogs. Scheetz, whose club of 55 members includes several from the Lawrence area, says rescue dogs make up a large majority of those that compete.

"The interesting thing is that a lot of dogs end up in the shelter because they are so active and people might not know what to do with them," says Scheetz. "But this is what Frisbee dog people love—a dog that jumps, a dog that runs."

Scheetz and his wife, Jackie Rodeffer-Scheetz, adopted their first disc dog, Towser, six years ago, before they were involved with disc sports. "We didn't know he was going to be such an incredible bundle of energy," says Scheetz. "I had a little floppy Frisbee, threw it and—boom!—he went and caught it."

So in 2009, Scheetz took Towser to Lawrence's disc-dog competition at Art in the Park, where the mixed-breed rookie won the contest, to his delight and surprise. And Towser won for four years in a row, until 2013 when he was beaten by another newcomer—Scheetz's younger pup, Killian.

Scheetz says not every dog can be a competitive disc dog. Some dogs do prefer sitting on a couch and being low-key, loveable companions. Scheetz advises against categorizing a disc dog by breed; a dog's personality and relationship with his or her human are the most important traits for the sport.

"We've seen every kind of dog you can imagine go out there run and jump and catch Frisbees," says Scheetz. "You're a team with your dog. You're communicating on a different level. Ultimately, the most important thing is it really helps create that special bond between the person and their dog." **LM**

