

When dogs fly!

How far or high can your dog jump? How fast can he or she swim? Want to find out? If so, DockDogs may be for you — and your furry best friend.

Begun 10 years ago as a fill-in act for ESPN's Great Outdoor Games at Lake Placid, New York, DockDogs has become so popular that it now holds events nationwide, as well as in Canada and the United Kingdom.

"And next year we're expanding to Australia, Japan, and even talking to a few other countries as well," said co-owner Brian Sharenow of Chicago.

DockDogs is a friendly competition between teams — a handler and dog — whereby dogs jump for distance (Big Air) and height (Extreme Vertical) or swim for speed (Speed Retrieve). For each event, the dogs jump into a large, portable swimming pool by first running down a long ramp. They then launch themselves into the air and out over the water, finish-



Dockdogs jump for distance (Big Air) and height (Extreme Vertical) or swim for speed (Speed Retrieve) in 140 competitions held across the country and in Canada and the United Kingdom.

ing with a tremendous splash. And judging from their enthusiasm, the dogs seem to love it.

"All breeds or mixed breeds are welcome to compete," said Sharenow. "We have many Labrador Retrievers entered, but the DockDogs distance record is actually held by a greyhound-coonhound mix from Pennsylvania named Country, jumping 28 feet, 10 inches."

DockDogs holds its annual Ohio event each September at the Great Outdoor Adventure Show at Hocking University in Nelsonville (www.greatoutdooradventure-show.com), this year scheduled for Sept. 25 to 27. Winners from that event are awarded points, prizes, medals and cash.

Top point holders at the end of the season are then invited to the DockDogs National Championship, this year to be held in Ohio for the first time, Oct. 16 to 18, at King's Island Resort and Conference Center near Cincinnati.

But not all competitors are looking to advance; most just enjoy doing something fun with their dogs. Such was the case with Steve Cox and his dog, Sam.

A local Nelsonville bank president, Cox brought Sam to the very first DockDogs event held in Nelsonville several years ago. But even though Sam loved jumping into the family swimming pool at home, the dog wanted no part of jumping into the DockDogs pool.

Fortunately, one of the veteran competitors gave Steve and Sam a few pointers, and as a result Sam ended up winning the novice competition. That victory went a long way toward convincing local dog owners that almost any mutt who loves the water can compete and may actually win.

Another way to get started in DockDogs is by competing in a club event.



Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's a DockDog!

"We have people who have never tried it before, and their dogs make amazing first jumps," said Jim Zelasko, vice-president of Buckeye DockDogs, an Ohio club. Zelasko and his wife, Jennifer, first got into DockDogs because they couldn't keep their chocolate Lab, Cammie, out of the small pond in their yard.

"So while looking for an outlet for her enthusiasm for water, we came across DockDogs on the Internet," said Jennifer.

The Zelaskos enjoy the competition but also enjoy the people associated with the sport. "We compete not only for our dogs' sake — we own a second dog, a yellow Lab named Hallie — but also for the experience of rubbing elbows with like-minded people," Jennifer said.

"They are some of the greatest folks we've ever met. Everyone's so kind, friendly and helpful with sharing advice."

The couple has traveled as far as 500 miles to a national event, but that's not unusual for serious DockDogs enthusiasts. Some 40 to 50 national competitors are on the road nearly every weekend for nine or more months each year.

Someone who traveled just over 500 miles to attend last fall's Nelsonville event was Karen Luciano, activities coordinator for Delmarva DockDogs, a Maryland club. She competes with an English-bred yellow Lab named Philo.

"My husband and I got into DockDogs just by chance," she

said. "Philo began swimming at four months of age, and even as a puppy he'd leap into the water. We first saw DockDogs featured on the Outdoor Channel on TV, thought it was pretty cool, and thought we'd check it out."

At first, the Lucianos planned to attend an event just to watch the other dogs compete, but some friends encour-

aged them to enter. In his very first try, Philo jumped 14 feet, 11 inches, and won first place in the Junior Division.

"After that we were hooked, and now we attend about one event per month," said Karen.

So how do you go about preparing your dog for its first event? Jim

Zelasko has some suggestions. "Because many people don't have access to a swimming pool or pond, a lot of it is land training," he said. "Start with perfecting the sit-stay command. In addition, work on your timing at throwing a plastic toy or retrieving bumper, making sure your release is at the same instant the dog reaches the end of the ramp."

If you do have access to water,

Zelasko says that training is mainly a matter of repetition, getting the dog used to jumping from various docks on command. But the secret is making sure the dog is having fun. Training should never seem like work, for you or your dog.

From that very first competition a decade ago at Lake Placid, where

a mere 20 teams competed, DockDogs today has grown to more than 10,000 competitors and 140 annual events.

"We've more than doubled in size during the past three years alone," said Brian Sharenow. "Some days we can't answer the phone fast enough due to the number of inquiries we receive from dog lovers."

Even if you do not have a dog to

enter in the competition, DockDogs is great family entertainment. More information is available at the DockDogs national Web site, www.dockdogs.com, or the Ohio DockDogs club site, www.buckeyedockdogs.com. □

To comment on any of Chip Gross's "Woods, Waters & Wildlife" columns, you may contact him through his Web site, www.chipgross.com.



Most dogs jump into the water eagerly, but some need persuasion.



The DockDogs annual Ohio event is at the Great Outdoor Adventure Show in Nelsonville, Sept. 25 to 27. The national championship will be held in Ohio for the first time at King's Island in October.