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Agility competitions for cats gain popularity

By Linda Lombardi
For The Associated Press
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Dog agility competitions make great TV, with pooches racing around an obstacle course, jumping through hoops and dashing through tunnels. If you've seen it, though, your reaction probably wasn't, "What about cats?"

But that's exactly the thought that Kim Everett-Hirsch of Portland, Ore., had before launching her first cat agility competition in 2005. "I thought there was no reason cats can't do it."

At that first competition, there were 30 cats, none of whom had ever seen the obstacle course before. And in the building next to the cat show, there was a motorcycle show.

"These people came on over," Everett-Hirsch said. "They said, you gotta be kidding. So they paid admission." And as the cats came out and got the hang of it, she says, "They were standing up cheering them, 'go girl go!'"

The jumps, tunnels, stairs and weave poles used for cat agility will look familiar to anyone who's seen the dog version of the sport, but the smaller size of the obstacles isn't the only difference. Dogs are expected to perform each obstacle on command, in an order that isn't obvious from the course layout. For cats, the obstacles are arranged in a circle, and the handler leads them around the course, making a game of it with a toy on a stick or a laser pointer.

"A cat's a little different," says Everett-Hirsch. "They're running the show. You have to make them want to do it."

Although the sport hasn't been going very long, there's already conventional wisdom about what breeds are best-suited.

That didn't stop Donna Hinton of Richmond, Texas, a serious competitor who has big Maine Coons instead of a lithe, short-haired Abyssinian. For her it's not about the breed, it's about the individual.

"You need a cat that has a good attention span, that's toy-driven," she says. "I've had some that decided 'I tried it, it's not my cup of tea.' You can't make them do it."

Success is also very much about the handler's skill and relationship with their animal. "You have to be in tune to your cat," says Hinton. "You have to be three feet ahead and anticipate their moves."

Since that first show in 2005, the sport has been gradually growing, with 10 competitions in the past year. It's also spreading to other countries: this year for the first time there will be a competition in Hong Kong and in mainland China. This season will also be the first in which the Cat Fanciers' Association (CFA) will start granting titles to the highest scoring competitors.

Anyone can enter a show and try out agility with their cat, says Jill Archibald, CFA's agility coordinator. It doesn't need to be a purebred, and it doesn't need to have trained in advance.

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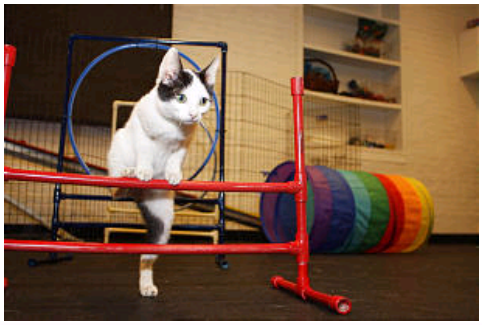

Jeanine Boubli, Associated Press

This photo taken Dec. 27, 2009 and released by New York Tails magazine shows Rosey, a Japanese Bobtail who can run a professional cat agility course in under 20 seconds, preparing to vault over a hurdle at a New York cat charity fundraiser.

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While experienced cats and handlers may finish a course in under 10 seconds, everyone gets three chances, for 4 1/2 minutes each try.

"Each time they come back, usually the cat has more of a clue what they're doing and the handler figures how to place the toy to get the cat to respond," she says.

The only preparation you need is that your cat has to be comfortable in strange places. Get it used to going out, for example to pet stores that allow animals. You can also prepare it by taking it to cat shows, even those that aren't offering agility. Any cat can participate in the "household pet" class.

One benefit of agility, like any kind of training, is how it affects your relationship with your animal.

"What ends up happening is that you and your cat start understanding each other," says Archibald. She says of her Japanese Bobtails, "They like interacting with me that much more now. If I walk out of the room and call their names, they come. They're very responsive to me now."

And it's a great way to see your cat being a cat, demonstrating its natural speed, intelligence, and — what else — agility.

"When you get a cat that enjoys it, nothing's more beautiful than putting a cat down and it hits the stairs and knows what it's doing," says Hinton.

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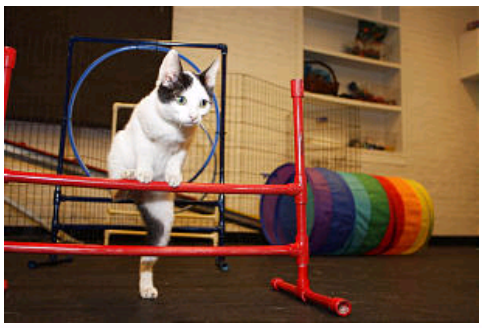

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