

Dancing With Dogs

Are you and your faithful companion tired of the same old tricks? Consider giving this "sport" a whirl.

By David Hayes *Reader's Digest* April 2007

One afternoon last August, as an easy listening version of *Hit the Road, Jack* fills the air, I watch Lynn Franklin and Joan Rosen, wearing black top hats and accompanied by their male partners, Sam and Tucker, begin a dance routine that involves spins, whirls and lots of fancy footwork on all twelve of their legs. For the finale, the two women create a ring with their arms. With a grand flourish, Sam jumps through Franklin's arms, over Tucker and through Rosen's arms. It is a bravura performance and both women enthusiastically congratulate their partners.

Kneeling on the floor in front of Tucker, who is about eight inches tall, Rosen gushes: "I've never seen such a good Daschund as you.

"That's a good dog, a good dog, such a good dog, Sam," exclaims Franklin, cupping the black Standard Poodle's head in her hands.

Franklin and Rosen, who perform under the name "Boogie Woogie BowWows," are having a private lesson with Donelda Guy, one of the top dog trainers in the United Kingdom and a leading figure in the emerging sport of canine musical freestyle. We're all in a banquet room in the basement of the Quality Inn in Bedford, Pennsylvania, where Franklin and Rosen are attending a musical freestyle retreat organized by Diane Kowalski, a U.S. trainer and coach.

Stepping forward, Guy claps her hands and says, in an English accent flavored by her home on the island of Jersey: "Of all the doubles routines I've seen, that's one of the best. Well done. Congratulations."



Forget *Dancing with the Stars*, folks. As the growing popularity of canine musical freestyle (please don't call it "dog dancing") proves, pooches can cut a rug better than most celebrities. The latest trend sweeping the dog world, it requires a solid grounding in obedience training, although traditional obedience competitions are rigidly structured drills, like what compulsory figures were to figure skating. Musical freestyle is a choreographed performance involving both handlers and dogs. To serious dog handlers, though, it's a mutt, an ungainly hybrid of pairs skating, ballroom dancing and equine dressage. How else to describe a "sport" where the handlers dress up in costumes and use props and the dogs often choreograph themselves?

One woman attending the retreat, Sheila Krakovitz, a 54-year-old trainer in Carlisle, Penn. with the retail chain, PetSmart, says that Wynston, her four-year-old Bouvier de Flander, came up with some of their best moves. "He just started crossing his feet over and walking sideways. And one day he sat on his butt and started scooting backwards."

When she spots a new behavior, Krakovitz gives it a name and uses a clicker and treats until Wynston will repeat it on cue. She calls it “capturing a move,” but warns that dogs “like to ad-lib during a routine, so you have to think fast when that happens.”

Patty Ventre, founder of the seven-year-old, Brooklyn-based World Canine Freestyle Organization (WCFO), once said that a great team should be as mesmerizing to watch as Torvill and Dean, referring to the legendary British ice dancers who won Olympic gold & world championships. (It’s unclear which one is meant to be the dog.) Given that there are equestrian events in the Olympics, Ventre set up the WCFO as a non-profit because she sees musical freestyle as one day becoming accepted by the Olympics.

Today, Ventre sits outside her room at the Quality Inn with Sassy, a gamine Chinese Crested Powder Puff-Papillon cross. Inside, her prize-winning Border Collie, Dancer, is snoozing on the bed. “It’s not a dog sport,” Ventre says. “It’s a team dance sport, only one partner happens to be a dog.”

When I mention the Olympics to Daisy Okas, spokesperson with the American Kennel Club, she sighs. “I wish her luck. I’d be very surprised if it’s the first dog sport sanctioned by the Olympics, as opposed to one of the many dogs sports we’ve had had going on here for decades, if not centuries.”

Everyone agrees that individual handlers sometimes combined music and movement, usually as part of obedience training. But the official origin of this Fosse-meets-Fido pastime is widely accepted to be the 1991 Pacific Canine Showcase in British Columbia, when Val Culpin, a noted trainer, arranged for a team obedience competition to include routines set to music. Since there were no established rules or judging criteria, Culpin developed them (drawing on judging used in dance and figure skating) and formed Musical Canine Sports International (MCSI). That was around the time that Ventre, who had been a competitive roller-skater and dancer as well as a dog lover, heard about it. A PR executive, Ventre was at that time representing sponsors of the biggest American dog shows. Since these events were seen by her clients and the general public as stuffy rituals that lacked pizzazz, Ventre quickly realized that dog dancing could liven things up.

Through the 1990s, the sport took off in the U.S., with Ventre eventually forming the WCFO. Today, the group has more than 1,000 dues-paying members and a mailing list of 8,000. She estimates that there are about 15,000 people dancing with their dogs world-wide, with active clubs throughout North America, the UK, Europe, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. It earned its pop culture credentials when it was satirized on a 2002 episode of the hit animated TV show, *King of the Hill*. (Hank enters his beloved but aging bloodhound, Lady Bird, in a dog dancing contest.)

Oddly, musical freestyle has grown everywhere except in Canada. Some think it was the difficulty and expense of promoting it across a large country with a small population. Today, Linda Le Houillier, a 47-year-old horticulturist and recently appointed WCFO judge who lives outside Quebec City, is organizing events for 2007. “I think if I can do some competitions here in Quebec, I can invite friends from Ontario and New Brunswick and get people doing it,” she says.

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Back at the retreat, Ventre has joined two dozen other women – fitting the profile of freestylers, they're all middle-aged, many of them empty-nesters – and their dogs who are gathered in the banquet room and listening attentively to Guy's workshop on motivation. Although it's supposed to be an advanced retreat, there is a wide range of experience, including a few doggy stage moms who mainly pursue freestyle because it enhances their dogs' resumes when they vie for commercial work.

Guy is a short, full-figured woman wearing a black shirt, white slacks and sandals. She is currently a minor celebrity in the UK for hosting a reality TV series called *Britain's Top Dog*. "What do we use to motivate dogs?" asks Guy rhetorically. "That's right, toys, food and praise."

When she calls for a volunteer, Lynn Franklin and Sam come forward. Guy instructs Franklin to make Sam sit and watch her. Obediently, the poodle sits and stares into Franklin's eyes. Standing a few feet away, Guy tosses a toy up and down in her hand. That would be more than enough to distract the average dog, but Sam's concentration never falters, even when Guy throws the toy on the floor next to him.

"Now that's a motivated dog," she says, as Franklin pops a treat into Sam's mouth.

A few minutes later, a blonde woman brings her Golden Retriever to the front. Unlike Sam, this dog stops to scratch on the way and ignores many of his handler's commands. ("He's a puppy," says Guy. "Don't let him wait too long. Just say 'watch me,' then as soon as he does it, give him the treat.") As the woman tries to get her dog to heel, she says "C'mon, c'mon."

"Whoa," says Guy. "You've been saying 'watch me, watch me.' Now you've switched to 'c'mon on.' Your dog is thinking, well, which is it?"

I notice there's a wide variety of breeds here – Sheltie, Bernese Mountain Dog, Corgi, miniature and standard Poodles, Black and Gold Labs, Golden Retriever, Saluki, Briard, Shar Pei, Yorkshire Terrier, Coton de Tulear, Daschund, Bouvier des Flandres, Border Collies... -- but a conspicuous absence of men. Although men have a long history of bonding with dogs, and a handful of top freestyle competitors, like London's Attila Szkukalek, are male, the vast majority in the sport are women. Is it the dancing? The dressing up? I ask Janet Amighi, who attended the retreat with Hero, her flat-coated retriever, but is, in her non-dog dancing life, is an anthropologist, academic and authority on the Middle East, for insight.

"I hate to use gender stereotypes," she says, "but animal sports attract a certain nurturing personality. You see it in horses, too. Women like competing but it's more rewarding if you bond with the animal at the same time. But, yes, it's probably the costumes and the dancing, too."

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Later that weekend, Angie Brown, a genial 53-year-old medical secretary and former dog trainer from North Carolina strokes the chin of her 11-year-old Border Collie, Jade. She explains that before traveling to an event like this – along with Jade she brought China, a frisky Border Collie puppy still being socialized – she bakes and then freezes liver pate that ends up looking like brownies. “It smells awful, but the dogs love it.”

Brown often takes Jade into nursing homes and schools to perform routines, like one she does to Cyndi Lauper’s *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun* in which she wears a red and purple costume with Jade in a matching collar. “Freestyle is different from other competitions. You get to be artistic, make a costume, have fun.”

Later, when retreat organizer Diane Kowalski, an award winning trainer and competitor, is giving a workshop on distance work, Brown volunteers to go up with China, who begins tearing in circles around her. Smiling, Kowalski says, “You don’t have to teach a Border Collie to do that. They’re herders.” Turning to her audience, she says, “Don’t forget to think about your dog’s innate behavior. You don’t have to reinvent the wheel to teach a retriever to retrieve. I know some say, my dog doesn’t play with toys or doesn’t retrieve. All dogs will play with toys and all dogs will retrieve. It’s just that some will do it more quickly and naturally than others.”

During a break, Kowalski sits outside at a picnic table. She’s a slim, striking woman with shoulder-length auburn hair and a polite but no-nonsense manner who was featured in a balletic pose with Wes, her Border Collie, in a *National Geographic* portrait last July. Today she’s wearing a pink shirt, gray slacks and white runners covered in hand-painted musical notes and paws.

“You have to keep dogs within their element,” she explains. “Those big Bernese Mountain Dogs are never going to be able to change direction as quickly as a Border Collie can. But a Bernese can stand up and put its paws on the handler’s shoulders. You could never do anything that dramatic with a little dog.

“We give the illusion that a dog is dancing but it’s not. It’s all about behavior. When someone says to me, ‘I couldn’t use that song because my dog doesn’t like it,’ I think, *it’s a dog*. The dog will like the song if you decide that’s the song you’re going to use.” Rolling her eyes, she adds: “I think some people give dogs human qualities.

Kowalski perfected her training in the late ‘80s at Sea World. “I was watching the shows and thinking, I’ll bet a dog trainer could learn a lot from these guys. You can put a collar and leash on a dog and make them do things, but you have to be a much better trainer to make a killer whale jump through hoops. I observed training sessions and learned how to break behaviors down, how to be more interesting and more reinforcing.”

In freestyle, Kowalski explains, you sometimes select music to match a dog’s natural gait. A handler wouldn’t normally choose a dainty minuet for a Bernese Mountain Dog or Lab, unless the goal was to create a comic effect. But sometimes dogs will naturally do an unusual behavior. In Kowalski’s case, she noticed Wes lying down and crawling backwards. It looked

a little like Michael Jackson's moonwalk so Kowalski refined the movements and found a Jackson song that she could build a routine around.

Each breed has its idiosyncratic traits. Border collies herd but also have a tendency to indiscriminately chase anything that moves. Standard poodles were bred as swimming bird dogs and are, according to Kowalski, very intelligent. But they're also known for the "zoomies," when without warning they lose their head and begin running madly off in all directions. Hounds, like Beagles, Salukis or Daschunds, assist hunters by tracking or chasing prey, but can be distracted by scents and are often aloof and standoffish.

"Tucker says, 'show me a rabbit and I'll consider it, make it worth my while,'" says Joan Rosen, Lynn Franklin's pairs partner, about her long-haired Miniature Daschund. Rosen, like so many others, got involved when her last child moved out. "I'd spent my whole life as a soccer mom and suddenly I was depressed"

What she hadn't realized was the transformation that would come with Tucker. Laughing, she says: "Doing freestyle gave my life new meaning."