

Frisbees: not just for people anymore

[Business](#)



Frisbees: Not Just For People Anymore Whoosh. The Frisbee whips through the air, spinning like a top, edges becoming indistinguishable with speed.

Soaring, rotation seemingly unstoppable, gravity nonexistent, it appears as if it is to remain perpetually in motion for millions of centuries. Then, out of nowhere, snap—a small mouth appears, snatches it out of the air, and skedaddles. Its tail, instead of wagging, points horizontally. Its legs gallop like a horse's, except five times smaller. Its ears stick straight up and its eyes are wild with excitement, all the while clutching the Frisbee between its teeth as if it were a small child.

And then it bounds back, coat rippling in the wind in a shimmering stream of white and black, tongue half-lolling out of its mouth, paws thundering on the dry brown grass of the empty park, and pride emanating from every inch of its small, furry body. Another Frisbee and dog take flight as I sit on top of the hill that overlooks the vast, empty field of a park. I can't help but feel slightly disappointed with the subculture topic I chose. Is disc dog just throwing Frisbees back and forth for hours on end, over and over again? How... repetitive. I feel a tap on my shoulder and look to my right.

A silver-haired man stands there, leash with a giant Labrador attached in hand. "First time at a playdate?" He smiles welcomingly. I explain to him that yes, it was my first time at a playdate, and that I was actually writing a paper on the disc dog subculture. He chuckles, almost knowingly." There's definitely a subculture here.

"And then he walks away, leaving me on the hill alone with my confused thoughts. Great, I think. The sport is both repetitive and strange. I

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contemplate leaving, deciding that maybe I would pick a less complex topic for my paper, but I realize that I am stuck here: my mother gave me a ride (as she was afraid that I would get lost in the middle of nowhere, which is where this park was located), and she was out shopping. Feeling dissatisfied and rather angry, I scowl, huff, and plop down on the hill that overlooks the playdate, believing that it will now take me years to figure this subculture out. Little did I know that within the next hour of my visit, the sport would become one of the most unique, communal, and admirable activities that I would ever have the pleasure to witness.

Despite its newfangled popularity over the years, disc dog originally began back in the early 1970s, when Frisbees were casually tossed around college campuses, parks, and any other leisurely space. The sport developed gradually as more and more young people decided to teach their canine friends how to catch a Frisbee in midair, and was seen for years as more of a fun, “hippie” sport rather than a serious commitment, especially when compared to other dog sports such as agility or schutzhund. However, it was not until a college student by the name of Alex Stein trained his pet dog, Ashley Whippet, to catch one of the flying disks that the sport began to be seen as just that—a sport. Ashley Whippet was a whippet—a dog breed characterized by their long, slender legs and agile bodies—that began entertaining at the tender age of six months for crowds at Stein’s college campus, Ohio State University. After Stein realized the level of Ashley’s talent, he began to call numerous agents, many of which simply hung up on the other end—despite Ashley’s ability to run at speeds up to 35 miles per

hour and simultaneously catch Frisbees in the air, often performing tricks as he did so.

However, in the middle of the eighth inning of the August 1974 Los Angeles Dodgers baseball game, Stein dashed onto the field with Ashley in tow and proceeded to throw the Frisbee back and forth to the confident, attention-loving dog on live national television (Museum). NBC trained their cameras on the incident for nearly ten minutes, watching Ashley twist, twirl, and clench a Frisbee in his mouth. The nation had never seen anything like it. And the next day, millions of phone calls flooded in, all attempting to reach Stein and the now-famous Ashley Whippet, who were to be signed to perform at two halftime games for the Los Angeles Rams only three days after their first appearance. Ashley would go on to become the three-time “Toss and Fetch” world champion—a formal competition started by the World Frisbee Championship in his honor—and would later become known as the pup who truly kick-started the sport of disc dog (Flying).

Disc dog competition centralizes around two main areas: distance catching and freestyle catching. Distance catching—formerly known as toss-and-fetch—consists of throwing the Frisbee back and forth as many times as possible, the trainer chucking Frisbee after Frisbee while the dog tears after every disc for two minutes straight. This specific score is based on a combination of accuracy and distance. After this lightning-round of Frisbee comes freestyle, which involves a ninety-second routine with the trainer and the dog that includes a combination of catching Frisbees and performing tricks. The pups snatch a Frisbee out of midair, and—like Ashley Whippet—rotate, flip, and sometimes leap off of their trainers’ backs as they do so. However, despite <https://assignbuster.com/frisbees-not-just-for-people-anymore/>

the massive amount of skill that this aspect of competition requires, competitors have no set number of tricks: for example, it is perfectly acceptable for an elderly or inexperienced dog to perform three tricks while a more serious competitor performs twenty (Williams).

In fact, the judges prefer that the dogs stick with only what they know, due to tricks requiring a large amount of intelligence, which often jeopardizes the safety of the routine itself. One quarter of the total score for a disc dog competition depends on how safely every move is executed in order to ensure that no dog is attempting to perform tricks that they simply do not understand, which would result in them potentially hurting themselves during a midair Frisbee catch. Now, within the last five years, disc dog has become known as one of the top dog sports in the country. Trainers seeking to escape the sometimes-elitist worlds of other dog sports (i. e.

agility) now participate in the sport of disc dog for a more leisurely yet competitive activity. Competitions occur across the entire country and range from regional competitions to the World Frisbee Championship. People from all over the world travel to watch dogs compete, finding them both entertaining and a “ new” activity. The sport itself is now considered beneficial to the dogs themselves, keeping their bodies in excellent condition and their brains quick and alert as they age. There are even certain types of Frisbees that are favored more than others, believed to be more compatible with the sport itself(Flying). Not only are there specific Frisbees that are considered better for the sport than others, but there are also specific breeds.

The most popular breeds of disc dogs are typically Cattle Dogs—used for their endurance and enthusiasm—and Border Collies—for their speed— with Australian Shepherds as the happy medium in between the two . However, the breed does not ultimately guarantee success. Many seasoned dog trainers prefer other, sometimes more difficult breeds to work with because they have the skills to manage their occasionally sporadic behavior. Ivy Williams , a certified dog trainer at a pet training facility in Minneapolis, Minnesota, prefers terriers because of their energy and agility. Her own dog, Kiwi , is part terrier, and is a three-time World Championship Qualifier; Williams is convinced that her terrier portion of her physique is why she is able to work with her so easily. However, because many disc dog enthusiasts and participants are not dog trainers, terriers are not commonly used because people do not want to put in the effort to train the “ sass” out of them .

Additionally, hunting breeds of dogs are rising in popularity, as fetching Frisbees in midair is easy cross training for the hunting season. The skill also comes much more naturally to them than it does many other dog breeds. The training required for disc dog has additionally evolved over the years. The dogs are carefully kept in prime physical condition, as many of their jumps are at high altitudes and therefore have high, hard impact when landing. Because of the sport being considered “ high-impact”, many serious competitors cross-train to develop muscle and prevent injury.

Williams compared the cross-training to that of great soccer players: if the players want to be good, they must develop more muscle so that the little annoyances—sprained ankles and other injuries—won’t hurt as badly. The <https://assignbuster.com/frisbees-not-just-for-people-anymore/>

same goes for disc dog. Whether the cross-training is a casual stroll around the lake, or taking the pooch hunting in the fall, the extra physical activity helps there to be more strength to support the dog's body in case of injury, and ensures that they are stable, healthy, and able to compete at an even higher level with even more complicated routines. However, it is ultimately not the dog breed, or the type of Frisbee, or even the level of competition that makes the sport enjoyable for so many: it is the relationship between the owner and their dog. This relationship is viewed as not only the most crucial part of disc dog, but also the most meaningful.

In the Minnesota Disc Dog Club specifically, skill level is often seen as an additive to a much more empowering activity, hence my initial confusion: prior to this meeting, I was under the impression that all disc dog participants were competitive and extremely skilled—and many are—but it is not a priority for 99.99 percent of the group. Most participants that specific day were there to simply toss a Frisbee around with their canine friend, regardless of the dog's aptitude for the sport itself, ranging from acrobatic, gravity defying catches to the I-can't-find-my-way-out-of-this-tunnel moments. Minnesota specifically is “casual-dominated” in that the Minnesota Disc Dog Club groups that meet during the week do so for the sole purpose of having fun with his or her pets (although some enjoy higher levels of competition as well), which fuels the laid-back, supportive, and positive atmosphere of the club itself. If one does not have a relationship with their pet, their training is severely affected: the level of obedience falters, as well as the willingness to train outside of practice (which is crucial to a sport such as disc dog, where cross-training is necessary to support the

dogs' bodies and prevent injury), and the bond between the owner and pet is weakened.

Therefore, if one truly wants to excel at disc dog, it is better to be good buddies with one's Chihuahua than to train a Border Collie that one doesn't know at all, simply because of its breed (Dogs). However, the disc dog subculture has one shared characteristic that is especially strong and very endearing: the sense of community. Before the disc playdate that I attended officially started, I chatted with Williams about the stereotypical disc dog participant, curious about if a sweeping generalization could be applied to this seemingly unusual group of people. Williams only laughed. " We've got everything from middle-aged businessmen to young dog trainers," she replied with a smile.

" The only thing that unites us is how much we love our dogs." This, as I soon discovered, was absolutely true: the common love and appreciation for animals brings this troop of unlikely friends together (Making). Not only are these people dog fanatics, but they are also the type that likes attention and wants to do interesting things with their dog in front of a crowd (Williams). The immediate success that one can have by simply participating in disc dog is a major draw—and it is something that is not commonly found in today's society . Because it is so easy to simply help other people within the sport, the feeling of leadership and teamwork outweighs the competitiveness and instead creates an incredible support network.

Prior to picking up the sport of disc dog, Williams describes herself as being an introverted college girl working in a research lab who one day decided to

pursue her true passion of dog training, quitting her job that afternoon. Five years later, she is a full-time dog trainer whose best friends are all “disc doggers” —who she describes as people that she never would have met without the sport—and who has both qualified for the Disc Dog World Championships three times and is the representative the Minnesota Disc Dog Club across the nation (Williams). And this story applies not only to Williams, but to the entire population of disc doggers in the MNDDC and around the world; for many, disc dog has created a sense of identity, a much stronger appreciation for the world of animals, and a sense of community and belonging that they have not found anywhere else. Perched on the top of a parched brown hill overlooking this desert of a park, I wonder if I will ever be able to feel as proud as that Border Collie after catching just one simple Frisbee in the air. Dogs never seem to have an issue with doing what makes them happy, and so far, this gathering of random, miscellaneous pups with their animal-loving owners have been doing just that for the past hour. I find myself now wanting to jump in with my two spastic Border Terriers, despite the fact that both are much too hyper to even concentrate on one specific task, let alone one Frisbee.

It's not that the sport is particularly suspenseful (like agility) or thrilling (like Schutzhund) but there's something else to it, something gripping and exciting that isn't present in the way the pups tear after rotating white disks or the way they use a human's back as a launching pad to snatch a Frisbee out of the air...it's present in the cheering audience, clapping their hands in excitement like little children. It's present in the shouts of the pets' names, the wagging of tails as the dogs realize that they have truly accomplished a

goal without even realizing it. It's present in the beaming faces of the trainers, watching all of their hard work pay off, while their pet, student, and best friend runs up to them and licks their cheeks, love emanating from every inch of their tiny body that thrums with energy and excitement. Disc dog is much more than just a handful of Frisbees, athletic dogs, and a bag of tricks. It's about appreciation for the creation around us and learning to recognize all that we have been given to coexist with on this earth.

It's about a sense of pride, knowing when one has accomplished something, and feeling genuinely proud of it. And, finally, it's about love—love for genuine friendship, love for the sport, and, most importantly, the love between a man and his dog: companions since the beginning of time.