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Dog sports,

a hobby that inspires dogs and people alike





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As indicated by the heading, the focus of this article is on dog sports. The approach to this topic is made step by step. Starting with what makes dog sports enjoyable to people, the second part shifts to the perspective of what makes a dog's heart beat faster. Then it is considered how well the needs and behavioural possibilities of both species go together. And finally, the article discusses the potential and value of dog sports within this context, and how dog sport relates to dog breeding and showing.

1. ZEST FOR LIFE

Whether in tropical rainforests, icy polar regions, the swamplands of Eastern Asia or the semi-deserts of Africa, domesticated dogs enjoy a level of popularity that well-nigh matches that in Germany. As different as the living conditions of all these dogs are worldwide, so are the reasons for keeping them. And even if we only single out the target group of the people served by the VDH, namely those who keep a dog or dogs purely as pets, a wide range of motives can still be found for doing so. Let us just turn our attention to this spectrum for a moment. People do things because they "get something" from them.

So what is it in this particular case? There are dog lovers who simply want a lovable, affectionate and reliable partner, and for them, their tail-wagging four-legged friend drives all sense of loneliness from the house. Responding to one other, even across the species barrier, is a matter of the heart. For others, the emphasis is more on shared activity, that helps to keep them fit in body and soul. Others, again, take particular joy in the beauty of the living creature at their side or, in our technology-dominated world, feel more closely in touch with nature thanks to their four-legged friend. Dogs also make it easier for many people to maintain contact with their fellow human beings, whether through a chat in the street or as a member of a dog club. It can also be highly interesting, aside from the emotional togetherness, to look at dogs as an object of intellectual study, e.g. by comparing breeds and their living conditions and development processes, and thus acquiring knowledge about them. Even the encouragement of performance and achievement can be a motivation for keeping a dog as a pet. And finally, the number of parents who decide to take a dog into their home and family as a means of promoting the social development of their children should not be underestimated. In a world without dogs,





all these needs would remain largely unfulfilled. There is no overlooking the fact that dogs can contribute enormously to the quality of life of people with compatible personality traits and the appropriate living conditions.

However, human wishes and the human will are only one side of the coin. Dogs also have needs, based on their common characteristics and individual traits, and appropriate account must be taken of this. Just how special dogs are in this respect becomes most apparent, perhaps, if you compare them briefly in your mind with cats, horses, chickens, guinea pigs or guppies, i.e. with other animal species that also enrich the lives of people, but in a profoundly different way. Dogs are not only sentient, but also, given the right developmental conditions, capable of forming lasting bonds with both other dogs and humans. This ability of dogs to bond with fellow creatures and sometimes even engage in really highly complicated social interactions, is not just a capability, it is also one of the most important sources of their well-being. Coming from their wolf ancestry, they are dependent on an intensive, multi-faceted social life if they are to be able to fully exploit their emotional, cognitive and physical potential. Speaking of the latter, movement and sensory performance are of particular importance. While family dogs do not generally cover an average distance of around 25 kilometres a day as did their wild ancestors, all healthy dogs nevertheless look forward to carry out an extensive patrol of their territory. However, they are not solely interested in getting from location A to location B. On the contrary, they repeatedly perform jumps, about-turns and digging activity – and all with visible well-being, if only they are allowed to. Their eyes, nose and ears provide them with reliable orientation, even under conditions in which people would be relatively lost. Provided they are not overdone, movement and sensory perception are a pleasure for dogs, and are beneficial to their health. In addition, together with a highly developed central nervous system, they form the basis for excellent learning capabilities that can be used in a wide range of behavioural fields. For a living being with a highly developed brain, boredom and a constant near-absence of environmental challenges are almost as stressful as situations in which it would have to endure pain or constriction. Anyone wanting to ensure an animal's welfare must always strive to expose it to appropriate challenges; learning is a basic need of all sentient animal species. In summary, it



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becomes abundantly clear that for a fulfilled life, dogs must be able to experience alternating phases of excitement and relaxation, slightly elevated outdoor demands and a somewhat calmer home environment, though in all cases with avoidance of extremes. Naturally, environmental conditions of this kind do not fall from the sky, but they can be created. People can contribute enormously to the quality of life of dogs if they want to and if they have sufficient capability and will.

It goes without saying that a dog must be housed and fed by the persons responsible for it in a manner that is appropriate for the species and for the individual animal itself. There are simple and straightforward guides available for achieving this. The more demanding task for the person on the rear end of the leash is ensuring healthy physical and mental occupation for their protégé. Here, daily outings and walks have an obvious role to play. But it also makes good sense to not only think of sport and play, which usually go hand in hand, in the quest to enrich the dog's environment, but to actually give these activities a key position. The next chapter discusses how promising such an approach can be. So does sport have a part to play in the process of behavioural enrichment?

2. DIVERSITY

The roots of dog sport lie in the sphere of police dogs, and there were times when the procedures for the training and performance testing of the authorities' working dogs were very similar to those for our four-legged friends in the newly founded clubs of the time. For good

reasons, after several transformative steps, things are fundamentally different today. Too divergent are the socially prescribed requirements of the police and military on the one hand and the recreational aspirations of private dog owners on the other. Even such useful helpers on four paws as guide dogs, service dogs and therapy dogs lead a different life than "sports dogs"; at least in their working hours. Dog sport is always a leisure activity pure and simple, and never a purpose-driven activity. Its ideal is also to ensure a healthy and enjoyable level of physical and mental fitness. The observance of safety in all its forms is a logical extension of the fundamental ideal of hobby activity to which the VDH is firmly committed. There is no exercise in our sport that involves turning an animal against a human; all exercises are concerned with the joy of movement or the skill in finding clearly marked prey objects or tasty morsels of food; and the focus is always on controllability and directability. If the precursors of the modern, contemporary forms of dog sport are included, the one with the longest tradition is the versatility or multidisciplinary trials programme officially known today as "IGP Sport" [Internationale Gebrauchshunde-Prüfungsordnung or International Utility Dogs Regulations]. This is therefore discussed in a little more detail below, before we move on to a number of other disciplines.

The work of the IGP is divided into three areas or "phases", the specifics of which can be briefly described as follows. In "tracking", the dog pursues a trail or scent that has been previously laid by a person, and thereby searches for a number of small "lost" objects. To do this,



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the dog uses its sense of smell. Pursuing a goal with its nose corresponds to a dog's most basic instincts, stemming from its evolutionary history. Its progenitor, the wolf living in the wild, also shows this behaviour pattern extremely frequently and uses it to find a not inconsiderable part of its food. The enthusiasm with which dogs engage in tracking work is therefore not surprising, being in fact virtually programmed in through their wolf heritage. Tracking calls for concentration, and tracking dogs make almost more demands on their mental capabilities than on their physical prowess, which in turn also contributes to a fulfilled life. One of the reasons for their mental exertion is that during the search, the dog has to make decisions and solve problems by itself, for example if it gets off track and seeks to return to it. All of this takes place in meadows, fields, woodland or other such like terrain, and calls for some degree of endurance and cross-country capabilities. The final aspect requiring mention here is the general situation before the start of tracking and after the end of the exercise,

because in these phases, the dogs are repeatedly moving among and between humans, other dogs and motor vehicles. Intact social behaviour is therefore already essential in the first of the three IGP phases.

Back on the training ground, the next exercises for the candidates are such things as off-leash heeling, stay and come commands, retrieving and sending-out, or in short, obedience exercises. More important than anything else in this area of activity is harmonious interaction between two individuals, one of them clad in fur, the other usually in a tracksuit. In the area of obedience, paying attention to one another and accommodation to one another are essential preconditions for harmonious cooperation, and result in positive evaluations. In terms of sensory modalities, the focus is now on the eyes and ears, whereby a significant level of differentiation ability is necessary, for example, to distinguish between different auditory signals. In addition, the dogs must be able to blank out and ignore potential distractions; once learned, this ability can also facilitate living together in everyday life. In the course of the obedience exercises, phases of rest and waiting alternate regularly with phases of greater activity, when the dogs have the opportunity to steer their motor skills with high-grade precision.

The third area, Phase C, is concerned with active behaviour in the form of bite quality trials. In the corresponding examination regulations, the term "protection exercise" is used for these activities. While this is the traditional expression, it is at the same time misleading, because in the context of dog sport eventing, dogs receive no instruction in warding off attacks by humans; that area is the reserve of state-certified, professional dog handlers. Rather, the animals are required to pick up prey items in predetermined sequences, drop them again and then move on immediately to other types of exercises. For spectators, this is always a highly attractive feature because, among other things, each trial includes several phases of gripping dynamic activity, whereby the motoric coordination of the participating dogs is, in itself, remarkable. And at least as impressive is the almost abrupt switch from high tension and high speed to precise forms of restrained obedience in the preparation and execution of the transport behind and beside the handler. Only dogs with high ability to calm down quickly,



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to exercise self-control and to willingly deal with satisfaction postponement meet the requirement for participation in IGP trials. Such dogs are, in effect, controllable four-legged athletes. They can break off, interrupt or change behaviour chains – including those that give them pleasure – on demand, which greatly benefits the relationship between dog and human, and is indeed even a prerequisite for its success. Similarly beneficial is the fact that eventing dogs learn with great accuracy to distinguish situations from one another and to respond to them accordingly. They follow discriminative and distinguishing cues, i.e. optical details that show them when which behaviour is the right one and when a completely different behaviour is indicated.

The facts established so far allow some conclusions: For dogs and people with the appropriate characteristics, dog sport eventing is a great shared activity. It offers both parties a positive balance of movement and rest as well as exciting stimulation of the senses and restful relaxation. It thrives on the successful cooperation of teams of two and is therefore a social activity in the best sense of the word, which also includes self-regulating mechanisms such as action-packed animation followed immediately by phases of calming-down. What makes it mentally fulfilling is its own special range of learning processes, leading to ever new patterns of behaviour. Its fitness-promoting effect is therefore not limited to the physical sphere alone. And a particularly positive aspect is the fact that it is anything but one-sided. Each of

the three phases calls for a completely different sphere of activity, and even within each one there is also considerable diversity. At no time, however, are the demands made extreme. Moreover, the individual phases can also be undertaken on their own and with a lower or higher level of aspiration.

Versatility dog sport eventing (IGP) does not seem desirable to everyone. No problem. The choice is great. Here, some alternatives are listed, in alphabetical order. Agility sport involves the completion of an obstacle course, with the emphasis on cooperation, agility and speed. In the companion dog trial, the directability and sociability of the dogs are put to the test. Dog dancing involves the presentation of dance-like choreographies and performances, along with rhythmic movement sequences involving dog and human teams. Dummy work is concerned with retrieval in natural terrain conditions such as would be found in actual hunting, though with the use of a dummy instead of actual prey. Flyball is characterized by an obstacle race, leading to the catching of a ball. Dogs engaging in hoopers have to complete an obstacle course, without jumps, and are directed by a handler who stands outside the arena and does not run with the dog. In mondioring, dogs are presented with a range of widely differing tasks, all of which can be subsumed under a particular theme, such as the “Age of Chivalry”, “Olympic Games” or “Pirates”. Here, obedience is of the absolute essence. Rally obedience also involves an obstacle course,



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but in this case, the focus is more predominantly on fun and matters of everyday life. Rescue dog trials are based on the requirements of practical needs and are divided accordingly into operational specializations, such as rubble search and area search. In sled dog sport, selected Nordic dog breeds are presented with the tasks they were once created for. Dogs seen rolling large gym balls on a defined playing field under supervision are engaging in “Treibball”. Competition dog sport is similar to athletics and amateur sport, except that it is not just a person competing, but a dog and their dog. During water work, swimming dogs retrieve objects hidden in the water, or provide assistance for people pretending to be in difficulty in the water. Sight-hounds participating in coursing competitions pursue an artificial hare moving irregularly in natural terrain, operated via invisible wires and pulleys. The procedure in a sight-hound race is different, as it takes place on an oval-shaped racetrack with optimized ground conditions. The aforementioned sports are not described here in detail as the

member clubs of the VDH that operate them have themselves decided to provide further information for those who want to learn more by presenting them on video films in the not too distant future.

Skilful engineers have designed comfortable automobiles, and millions of people use them without incident as a means of transportation. A minority, however, drive them carelessly and cause injuries to fellow human beings in accidents, or even use them to deliberately run over their perceived enemies. Pharmacists have developed medicines that are used beneficially for the good of mankind. A small number of individuals, though, misuse them, either negligently or intentionally, to poison themselves or others. Investigative journalists inform us of factual matters about which we previously had no proper knowledge. The vast majority of these reporters research thoroughly and reproduce the facts correctly. A small number of black sheep among them, however, simply invent their own seemingly conclusive data or engage

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in the dissemination of rumour where what is needed are hard facts. The task of police officers is to ensure law and order, but in rare cases, we find a policeman robbing a fuel station. That is simply the way the world is. But what does all this have to do with dog sports? It needs to serve as a lesson to the makers of dog sports. The prevalence of dishonest or unlawful activity or acts committed by people with mental disorders that are detrimental to others or are otherwise harmful in their effects is not so small as to be able to be dismissed without consequence. No matter where you look and in whatever area you take on leadership tasks, you have to reckon with a small percentage of your fellow men or women acting not as they should. Consequently, preventive action is essential – in dog sports just as in the field of road traffic, the medication of patients, journalism, or the training of people entrusted with the performance of public duties. The concept of the VDH includes the following conviction-based policies. All dog sport activities are in line with democratically generated regulations. They are carried out in practice sessions offered by specialized clubs, are open for viewing by the public, and are under the guidance and control of extensively trained and certified trainers and performance evaluators. In keeping with all the tenets of animal welfare, dogs are only allowed

to participate in any sport provided they are suited to do so in terms of their disposition and constitution. If only for purely ethical reasons, no concessions whatsoever can be made in this regard. Before being allowed to participate in IGP sport and a number of other sport disciplines, dogs must have passed a companion dog test. Advisory services regarding alternatives to the originally envisaged sport are offered in the event of unsuitability. Prospective and experienced dog sport participants are provided with the latest expertise. Socialization of the dogs is always accorded the highest priority.

3. SYNERGY EFFECTS

Dog sports can be done as a pastime. For enthusiasts of the respective sport, however, it will be a key element in their lifestyle. Both approaches are equally justified. Naturally, when buying a puppy, owners with more ambitious performance aspirations will be guided in their choice by how promising the little creature appears for a future career in sport. They will prefer certain puppies and certain breeders. In this regard, they intervene in the market by influencing the choice of breeding bitches and stud dogs, even if they have no whelping box at home themselves. Dog sport can influence breeding so strongly that the off-



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spring, as a result of being selected largely on the basis of sports criteria, come to form their own subtype, which may differ significantly from the original conformation. But also for those with a commitment to preserving the classical breed type, the results from dog sport can provide valuable information of relevance for breeding. If a dog is successful in sport, it is, at least in the phase of its active career, by its nature energetic, capable of learning and easy to handle, and these are all good signs for a breeder. It is even more positive if the same dog continues to do sport, in more moderate form, even at a fairly advanced age, and thereby demonstrates keen, effortless engagement and visible enjoyment in what it is doing. This also indicates it to be well-placed in terms of hereditary diseases which only show themselves at an advanced age. Agility, insensitivity to injury, motivation and rewardability are also virtues that are easier to foster through engagement in dog sport than without it. Narrowed airways, excessive volumes of skin, drooping eyelids and similar serious problems can be viewed as incompatible with sporting commitment in all weathers and in varying terrains. Dog sport devotees tend to pick up immediately on alarm signals that point in a negative direction. In this area, and not just in this, they should be seen as important advisors. Elements from dog sport can also be incorporated into breeding approval tests. In this way, the active behaviour, endurance, triggering of breathing sounds, the will-to-please and various other individual characteristics can be directly included in breeding decisions.



Sport dog owners within the scope of the VDH are committed to the ideal of a happy, fit dog and implement these values in everyday practical life. Their self-perception and ideal is that of an active, responsible dog lover who brings him/herself and their dog into a social community in which movement, learning, communication and play are not only important in theory, but are also their constant agenda in everyday life. At their best, dog sports serve as a source of behavioural enrichment. This is where the deeper meaning of the entire undertaking lies. The occurrence of exaggerations in dog sport would be diametrically opposed to the concept of the VDH.

