

Text: Kate Kennedy

Photography: Kate Kennedy, Melissa Wilson, Susan Kleinhaus

Flyball Champion

Flying high

Meet SA's original Th One and Only Flyball Grand Champion



Keagan 'flying' back to the start with his ball



Keagan showing off his Flyball Dog of the Year 2008 sash



Lynda and Keagan at home

He wasn't planned, but he certainly was wanted

CELEBRITY PET

Flyball Champion



Keagan stays focussed on his way to the Flyball box.



Swimmer's turn



The Flyball box has undergone changes to make it safe for dogs to use. "The original box put a lot of strain on the dogs' shoulders, as they had to hit the spring head-on and then twist to catch the ball," says Lynda. "The new box is designed to reduce the strain and assist with faster running times."

The new design features two holes so the dog can catch the ball in a natural frame. Dogs are either right- or left-handed. Depending on whether they naturally turn right or left, the ball is placed in the corresponding hole and the dog uses the box to kick off from on his way back to the start – the same way a swimmer will kick off from the pool's edge.

After participating in the fast-paced sport of Flyball for five and a half years, Border Collie Keagan is South Africa's original Th One and Only Flyball Grand Champion. To properly recognise this prestigious achievement, KUSA named the title after his kennel name – Th One and Only.

"According to the written rules in the KUSA Flyball handbook, the first dog to collect 1500 points would have the title named after him. So when Keagan had achieved this in June 2009, I notified KUSA," says Lynda Coughlan, Keagan's owner. "At that stage the rules didn't say that he had to earn 1400 of those points at championship shows."

Keagan accumulated more than 100 points at open shows, and KUSA informed Lynda that her dog could earn no more than 100 points at open shows – he was not eligible for the title. It was then that Lynda and Keagan set out to chase the title. It took another three months, country-wide travel and help from friends to gather the necessary points. In September 2009 Keagan and Lynda achieved their goal. The title was finally awarded to Keagan in March 2010.

Better than all the rest

Giftnell Th One and Only was born on 4 December 2003. He was the last puppy in his litter to find an owner. When Lynda accompanied a friend to collect her new pup, she was persuaded to give Keagan a home. "He wasn't planned, but he certainly was wanted," says Lynda. "Border Collies are very intelligent and need to be stimulated mentally and physically," Lynda continues. "Keagan went to puppy school, basic obedience and then Agility. When we were training for Agility, the trainers introduced us to Flyball. This was the perfect sport for Keagan – he loves balls!"

Although he still participates in Agility and Dog Jumping, Flyball is Keagan's passion. He is a gentle soul, a dog with a huge heart. He loves teaching the younger dogs about Flyball and runs really well in teams of inexperienced participants. At seven, Keagan is now considered a veteran, but Lynda has no plans to retire him. "He loves what he does," she says. "His health is good enough for him to continue competing, so there's no reason to stop."

Flyball fun

Flyball is run as a relay, in teams of four dogs and their handlers. Two teams race

over a series of four jumps before each dog releases a ball from a special box at the end of the course. Once the dog has caught the ball, he returns back over the jumps to his handler. Once he has crossed the start line, the next dog is released. As soon as each team member has successfully completed the course, the clock is stopped and points awarded to the dogs, not the team – this allows dogs to run in any team at any show. A time of less than 20 seconds earns each dog 36 points; 24 seconds earns 26 points. If you do the maths, you can imagine how many shows Lynda and Keagan had to attend to accumulate 1500 points! Keagan's average time for a clean run is 4.5 seconds.

Give it a try

Lynda and Keagan train for Flyball at Birch Acres every week (for more information, visit www.badtc.co.za). "Flyball is a wonderful sport that any dog can do," says Lynda. "The smaller dogs are great to have in a team, since the height of the jumps is determined by the smallest team member." If you would like to know more about this addictive sport, call Liesl Twyman on 083 307 1781 or mail Twyman01@iburst.co.za.