

# Woofers Times

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By Nancy Frensley

## “Canines Compete in Harmonious Indoor Sport *Doggie Dancing!*”

Despite having two left feet, dogs can be remarkably good at dancing, and just about all of them enjoy it. Imagine taking all your dog's great moves and organizing them to music. Does your dog love to run in circles around you? Reward the circles with a tasty treat, turn in the opposite direction while your dog goes 'round, add your favorite music, and—voila!—you're dancing!

Dogs are so good at dancing that it has become a competitive sport. Doggie Freestyle, commonly called “doggie dancing,” came into existence in the competition obedience arena at the Crufts International Dog Show in 1990. Mary Ray, a British trainer and exhibitor, demonstrated the beauty of a person and dog working together to music. Working at a distance and incorporating tricks and other moves that had never been seen before in the obedience world, Mary did a stellar freestyle exhibition that had audience members on their feet, with tears streaming from their eyes.

Freestyle work is just plain fun. It doesn't matter what background or level of training the handler has, and the sport is great for dogs of any breed, size, age, and temperament. Every person and every dog can get involved and enjoy this sport.

It gives young dogs an outlet for their energy and, yes, even creativity, while they learn to be handler-focused. Older dogs and dogs recovering from illness and injury benefit from the additional attention and interaction with you.

Doggie dancers learn moves that increase their agility, stir up their brain cells, and move them outside their daily habits. Canine freestyle embraces obedience, agility, handling, and bonding at all levels, making it one of the most comprehensive of all dog sports. Of course, freestyle dogs are trained using positive, affirming techniques, not corrective methods that could subdue the dog's enjoyment and spirit.

Before beginning your freestyle adventure, ask yourself if there is a little bit of the dancer in your heart. If you don't enjoy dancing, you can't expect your dog to. But, even if your dancing is confined to swaying in front of the stereo or jumping around to your iPod, it's not difficult to start including your dog. You just need to teach a few basic freestyle moves, and you can do that in your living room.

The basic moves include heeling with attention, side changes, backing up, spins, weaving, crawls, roll-over, and bows. These are easily taught with a handful of treats and a happy voice. And your dog may surprise you by offering a few of his own moves. Half the fun is finding music that suits your partner's tempo and style. You may even find that your dog has strong preferences in music that will broaden your own.

There are quite a few websites and many materials available to get you and your canine partner started. If you find you really like it and want to get involved at the competitive level, you might consider taking some positive-only obedience classes; these will help you train your dog to the Novice or Rally Novice levels. To simply enjoy the fun and challenge of freestyle as an activity you and your dog can share, home schooling and the occasional workshop will keep you going.

You can learn more about this sport by visiting the websites of Mary Ray ([www.maryray.co.uk/freestyle.html](http://www.maryray.co.uk/freestyle.html)) and Attila Szkukalek ([www.dogdance.net](http://www.dogdance.net)). Both elite freestyle competitors in Europe, their sites include great video clips so you can see the sport at its best. For a live look, the World Canine Freestyle Organization, which generously lent us the photos for this article, holds an annual Dancing in the Redwoods competition in Santa Rosa.

So if you and your dog need a little exercise but it's raining cats and dogs outside, put on your dancing shoes, gather those treats, and start the music. The two of you may just dance the night away.

***Nancy Frensley, CPDT, the training manager at the Berkeley-East Bay Humane Society, has been a freestyle exhibitor and teacher since 1995. An "Introduction to Canine Freestyle Workshop" is scheduled for Sunday, April 22, from 2 to 6 PM at BEBHS. Watch the website at [www.berkeleyhumane.org](http://www.berkeleyhumane.org) for more details.***