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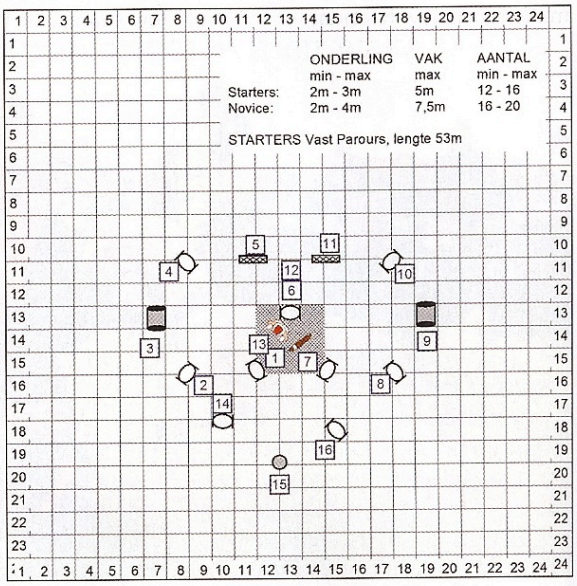
Ula hoops!

New dog sports come and go, but one of the latest arrivals looks set to run and run. DEBBIE BRIDGES and Ula try their hand and paw at Hoopers

It's long been acknowledged that getting out and doing something sporty together is one sure-fire way of strengthening the bond between us and our dogs. Whether it's agility, flyball or canicross, increasing numbers of people are teaming up with their canine companions to indulge in a favourite pastime – and adding a whole lot of fun into the bargain.

For those who are less physically active, there are fewer opportunities, but a relatively new sport offers people and dogs the chance to participate and compete, regardless of age, health issues or limited mobility.

Hoopers originated in America in the 1990s, spread to Europe, and eventually made it to the UK, where it's steadily catching on. Based on familiar agility lines, courses are constructed using low-impact obstacles designed to be kinder to dogs' joints and limbs. Instead of jumps and contact equipment, there are giant hoops to pass through, barrels to go round, and tunnels that are shorter and wider than the norm. Handlers don't have to run with their dogs and, for maximum points, can direct operations from behind a line or a box marked out at the centre of the course.



Facing page, top: Ula manages a sequence of hoops and the tunnel.

Facing page, bottom: The plan of the heart-shaped course.

Country capers

In a gently-sloping field, nestled in the heart of the Cornish countryside, six dogs are zooming about and letting off steam, while a small group of Hoopers enthusiasts familiarise themselves with a numbered, heart-shaped course.

"We made it heart-shaped because we love Hoopers!" says Dee who, along with partner Cath, has been running classes in the up-and-coming sport for about a year.

The drive down a bumpy farm track that looked an inch or two narrower than the average car was worth the effort for the view alone. But the Ballpark, as this neatly mown, 2.5-acre space is known, is more than a good spot to admire the countryside. To those in the know, it's a little slice of doggie heaven.

The Ballpark is the larger of two fully fenced dog exercise areas at opposite ends of a 21-acre farm, previously run by Dee and Cath as an award-winning dog-friendly campsite. Deciding it was time for a change, they closed their gates to campers and set about creating a place where dogs can have fun and their owners can have peace of mind.

"People hire the Ballpark and the Bolthole for a variety of reasons," says Cath. "They may have a reactive dog, or one with no recall; they might want to do some training, or perhaps just play ball. Their dogs are completely safe here, and there are no worries about other people's dogs muscling in."

A number of organised classes and activities are available at the farm, and it was Dee who suggested adding Hoopers to the list.

"I saw a video on YouTube and couldn't get it out of my mind," she says. "It took months of research to get to grips with the course layout and all the regulations, especially as a lot of the information I was looking at was in Dutch!"

Photos © Beano's Ballpark

Top right: Dee helps everyone familiarise themselves with the course.

Second from top: Trevor and Tess practise distance handling.

Below: The Sunday afternoon class with Cath (second left) and Dee (third left).

Photo © Beano's Ballpark

While Dee was translating her how-to instructions, Cath was grappling with the design of equipment according to Nadac (North American Dog Agility Council) rules. The over-size croquet hoops that form the basis of today's novice level Dutch course, she tells me, are made of underfloor heating and overflow pipes, while the 'barrels' are recycled recycling bins from the former campsite.

Like the agility equipment that's now used for regular classes in a separately fenced area, Dee and Cath felt their new Hoopers kit would make an excellent playground for their two Border Terriers, Beano and Jester.

"At the time, we didn't know if it would work for anyone else," says Cath. "But even if it didn't, we thought we'd have loads of fun with £100 of plumbing gear!"

All abilities

As it turns out, quite a few people are having fun with Cath's pipework creations, and this afternoon's group were some of the first to sign up for Hoopers sessions at the Ballpark.

Top: Cath congratulates Jester on a blinding run.

Above: Kath and Seren in action.

Below right: Ula's first attempts at going around a barrel are encouraging.

Kate's four dogs are aged between five and nine, and she says it's important to consider their differing requirements and abilities.

"That's the great thing about Hoopers," she says. "It suits all my dogs. It's less strenuous for Josh and Archie, who are older, and it's good for Luna, who's got all the energy of a five-year-old Border Collie but only three legs. I'm really aware of the need to avoid putting pressure on her physically, and this is the perfect way of letting her use that mad collie brain power!"

Paula and Trevor have brought two of their five dogs along – seven-year-old Border Collie Tess and Charlie, a collie-retriever cross.

"All our dogs like playing at Hoopers, but we can only get two in the car," says Paula.

Tess competed successfully at agility before a recent diagnosis of mild hip dysplasia meant it was time to retire, but her enthusiasm for the sport left Paula with some painful memories of their partnership.

"We used to call her 'Tess the Teeth' because she'd nip me when she thought I wasn't running fast enough!" Paula recalls. "Trevor had to take over because he's slightly faster on his feet!"

It sounds like Tess is an ideal candidate for the distance handling that Hoopers encourages!

At the younger end of the scale is Breeze, Paula and Trevor's Border Collie puppy, who might one day pick up where Tess left off.

"She's too young to start agility," Trevor says, "but she can do a bit of Hoopers, as there's no jumping involved."

And I notice it's not just the dogs who start young in this sport. Kate's two-year-old daughter, Esme, is keen to get in on the act and, after a few toddler-style

Facing page, top: Hoopers handlers start young!

Facing page, far right: Kate's dogs look happy at the end of their Hoopers session, (l-r) Luna, Seren, Archie and Josh.

PHOTO © BEANO'S BALLPARK

attempts to be helpful, Dee finds a suitable job for our junior handler.

"Just throw the ball when I say," she tells Esme, and the two of them wait on the sidelines for each of Kate's dogs to come charging through the final hoop, whereupon the ball reward putters across the grass, more or less on target, and harmony is restored!

TIME TO SHINE

Watching from the sidelines, I can see the dogs work at varying distances from their handlers, but what they all have in common is an impressive turn of speed, which makes it hard for a newbie like me to get a handle on technique. At the end of the session, I'm surrounded by lolling tongues and smiling faces, but I remain unsure how those supersonic rounds were achieved, which is unsettling, as my little dog Ula and I are next up.

No need to fret – Dee's right there beside us as we stand uncertainly at the start.

"Try asking her to go round a barrel to begin with," she says, and I give Ula a whiff of the treat bag, which gains me her instant and undivided attention.

Proving you can do anything if you've got enough sausages, we make short work of the practice barrels, tunnels and hoops and, in no time at all, we're ready for our maiden run.

As a regular at a local agility class, Ula is accustomed to negotiating a series of obstacles, and she has her own way of doing it... sloooowly! In her usual manner, she sails unhurriedly round today's course, like a small and stately galleon with the minimum of wind behind her.

I stay alongside, encouraging and dispensing sausage. Despite our leisurely pace, we manage to miss a hoop and Dee steps in with advice as I hesitate over going back for it.

"Keep going!" she says. "As far as the dogs are concerned, every course they run is a blinder. If they do something that's not quite right, it simply means they need more help with that bit next time."

We carry on and as Ula trots confidently through the final hoop, I get that euphoric feeling that comes, however fleetingly, with being in step with your dog. By the time we're going round for the third time, I notice Ula's steady pace remains constant as the obstacles she's encountering don't interrupt her flow.

As a grand finale, hot shots Beano and Jester take a couple of turns round the course, more like speedboats than Ula's stately galleon, but the increased pace is equally consistent.

"That's what we love about Hoopers," says Dee. "It's all about smooth lines and dogs thinking for themselves. With no contacts to worry about, they can work out their own way of tackling each element of the course, without the need for us to keep barking commands at them."

I guarantee anyone who enjoys playing games with their dog will love Hoopers, too. Fun and accessible to all, it looks set to spread – watch this hoop-shaped space!

Find out more

For further details of Hoopers classes and other activities at Beano's Ballpark, go to www.outintheopen.co.uk, email beanos@outintheopen.co.uk or phone Dee and Cath on 01326 340627 or 07813 984662

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Debbie Bridges is a freelance writer. She lives in Devon where she spends her free time exploring every inch of the countryside in the company of her Romanian rescue dog Ula.