

New tricks

Dogs salivate for dance class

Story by TED SULLIVAN Photography by DEIRDRE EITEL of the Chronicle

Sharon Lowry looked into Timber's eyes and held her paws as the couple danced to Lou Bega's "Mambo No. 5." Like a woman shaking her hips, Timber's tail was wagging. Like a dancer in a hot outfit, her fur was well groomed. And like a teenager doing the nasty, her tongue was hanging out. She owned the floor. Timber and Lowry enjoy a growing fad that is taking a bite out of the traditional waltz, cha-cha, fox trot or twist. They are one of about a dozen Bozeman couples practicing choreographed, funk-charged musical performances known as "dog dancing." "With dog dancing you have a closeness," Lowry, 64, said of grooving with her border collie and miniature Australian shepherd crossbreed. "We're close with our bodies. We're interacting." While dancing to "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," Lowry backed Timber away for a twirl. She brought her back in for a rollover. And she even led Timber through her legs. "This is a smart, smart little dog," Lowry said, wiping sweat from her forehead. "Dog dancing is something to do and it keeps you active." Local dog dancers meet weekly at the Gallatin County Fairgrounds to practice weaves, back aways, spins and jumps.

They even plan on forming a dog-dancing club. "It's really expressive," said Nancy Tanner, 41, who teaches dog-dancing classes as part of her business, Paws & People. "It's teamwork, training, music and creativity." Dog dancing, also known as canine freestyle, is founded on obedience. The handler uses conditioning to train the dog to perform dance moves to the music's beat. Costumes are often part of the performance. And the dog is always the star. "I love dancing with my dog because the focus is all about my dog and not about me," Von Jelberg, 55, said. Of her Yorkshire terrier, Artie, Jelberg said, "She actually loves coming to dance class."

Jelberg has four other dogs. Dancing with Artie is their personal time together. She described Artie, wearing a pink bow on her head, as "athletic." "Dogs really like entertaining," she said. "They like showing off." Dog dancing incorporates agility, handling and bonding between the dog and owner. Every movement is accomplished through verbal cues, body language, plenty of treats and lots of encouragement. "Good girl," the dog owners yell while bobbing their heads, tapping their feet and slipping their dance partner a treat. Connie Garrett, 35, plans on performing a cowboy routine with her Australian shepherd, Sampson, for a dog-dancing contest, although the closest ones are in Seattle and Wisconsin. They practice regularly. "It's kind of fun to go up to Peets Hill and dance with your dog," she said. "We'll go on walks and spin and twirl along the way, and we practice the routine in the backyard." In her cowboy routine, Garrett will wear a cowgirl outfit. Sampson will wear a cowboy hat and gun holsters. "He likes wearing costumes," Garrett said. Dog owners use "clicker training" and "rewards" as positive reinforcement to teach their dogs. It takes repetition and practice to reach the point where a dog-dancing couple can enter a competition. But it's impressive how much the dogs want to please their owners, Todd Saunders, 35, said. "Look at all these dogs and all they can do," he said, pointing toward the dance floor where four women danced with their pets. "The dogs will do anything for you, you just have to spend a lot of time with them," he said. "Everybody wants to have the best-behaved dog in the world." Garrett admitted dog dancing was a bit funny, but "I'm kind of goofy at heart," he said. "Dancing is just fun." Ted Sullivan is at tsullivan@dailychronicle.com



Von Jelberg, left, and Sharon Lowry watch as instructor Nancy Tanner demonstrates some moves with her Border collie, Story.



Tanner pauses in the doorway of the poultry and rabbit barn at the Gallatin County Fairgrounds Tuesday evening to get the attention of Story, before beginning a dance.



Lowry holds her Border collie, miniature Australian shepherd cross, Timber, as she waits her turn to perform.



When the dancing gets serious, Connie Garrett ditches her flipflops to better dance with Oliver.



Artie looks up with rapt attention as she waits for her reward for a job well done.