

## **Can-Am Goes to the Dogs: A New feature at This year's Show**

Karen Sandford and Brian O'Connor are no strangers to the dynamic world dog sports. Both are protégées of the legendary show producer, Herb Williams, whose canine extravaganza in its heyday thrilled millions of fans of live theatre. Following in Herb's footsteps, Karen and Brian have mounted a spectacular horse-and-dog relay for this year's Can-Am Equine Expo. Between practices and performances, they have taken some time to respond to a few questions to put this latest new Can-Am feature in context.

1. Let's begin with some very simple questions to help readers get a sense of how a group of athletic performance dogs could possibly find a natural place at the Can-Am Equine Expo. What is a Dog/Horse Relay? How are the horse-and-dog teams paired and do they interact in any way before or during the event?

**Horses and dogs are actually a lot more similar than one might think, so it only seems natural to have them work together in a show such as Can-Am. The Can-Am audience is used to seeing the connection between rider and horse as they run together through a series of jumps. The rider provides directional information to the horse through the reins and the rider's own body movement. A dog receives its directional information from its handler's movements, body positioning and footwork. A well-trained agility dog will be so in sync, so sensitive to its handler's movements, that even the slightest error in foot placement may potentially pull a dog off course. It's poetry in motion watching an experienced handler providing precise and accurate information to their dog.**

**In a horse-and-dog show, each horse will be partnered with a dog to form a team. The teams will work together to race against the clock. The horse will always go first. The rider and horse will run a "jumpers" course. When the horse crosses the finish line, a whistle will blow and the dog will be released to run an obstacle course. The dog's obstacle course will be a series of jumps and tunnels all within the centre of the arena. When the dog crosses the finish line, the clock will stop. To add a bit of excitement, the last jump for the dogs will increase in height, as the size of the dogs gets bigger. If any bars are knocked off a jump (by horse or dog) a time penalty will be given to the team. However, if the dog is able to jump the increased height of the last jump, the team will be awarded with time being taken off of their final score for each additional bar that was added.**

2. Now that we've established some of the formal parameters of the event, let's focus on some historical background about the Dog/Horse Relay as a sporting event. The relay event was invented by Herb Williams many years ago for the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair. The concept and basic course features began with him; but in the many years since, it has evolved in the hands of other show producers. What is your background in mounting an event like this, and in what ways do you think you can make your appearance at Can-Am uniquely your own?

**In my opinion, Herb Williams is a creative genius in the entertainment world. His original horse-and-dog relay event has been used as a template for many other shows, including ours. In that same creative spirit, we have added our own elements as well. Not only do we have races, but we also will have the horses and dogs paired together doing other events, such as barrel races and pole bending.**

**And like any WoodJocks' production, there are always elements of zany furry comedy that our audiences seem to enjoy.**

3. The Woofjocks have been around for a number of years. Many in your group are well-known dog trainers with years of experience performing at fairs and exhibitions. Could you give us some background on its beginnings and tell us about where your show's been and where you'll be going in the coming year?

**The WoofJocks Canine All Stars have been around since 2004. We started as a small dog-demo show that was intended to promote some of our team members' local dog training schools. Over the years, we have evolved from a humble demo squad to a theatrical performance showcase. We have numerous show packages available from small and intimate to grandiose. We have a dock diving pool and a foam pit pool (which is basically indoor dock diving). We've performed at various fairs and exhibitions across Ontario, and had regular engagements with returning shows like the Canadian Pet Expo and the Toronto Sportsmen's Show. We've also been mainstays at Canada's Wonderland for eight consecutive years. Branching out, we've experimented with theatre performances, using an all-original script (complete with characters, storyline, props, costumes), and this year we have been invited to perform at the Royal Manitoba Winter Fair in Brandon.**

4. As mentioned, some of your handlers are professional trainers. But what about the other handlers in the show -- what kinds of backgrounds do they have as far as work and dog sports go?

**All of the WoofJocks handlers are involved with dogs in some capacity. We have some handlers that actually own and operate dog training schools, such as K9 Central in Bowmanville, Scholars in Collars in Burlington and Absolute Agility in Kingston. All of our handlers are not only dog trainers but also we have some handlers that are vet technicians, groomers and even a border patrol dog detection handler. Some of our talented dogs also have day jobs. We have a bedbug-detection dog, and quite a few of our dogs have appeared in film, TV and print ads.**

**In their spare time, our handlers spend quality time with their dogs competing in dog sports such as agility, flyball, dock diving, disc, obedience, rally and scent discrimination, just to name a few. One of our talented trainers will be competing for Canada in the Netherlands during the World Agility Championship.**

5. Tell us about what breeds we can expect to see in action at the Can-Am.

**All of the dogs that perform with the WoofJocks Canine All Stars are athletes in their own right, but first and foremost they are also our family pets and we love and adore these dogs for their own individual personalities. We will be introducing a variety of breeds at Can-Am, including Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Golden Retriever, Nova Scotia Dock Tolling Retriever, Australian Shepherds, Cattle Dogs, Border Collies and various mixed breed dogs. Quite a few of our dogs are also rescue dogs.**

6. Some dogs lose their minds around other animals, including horses. While dog trainers tend to know the nature of their pets intimately, do you plan on taking any extra measures during the pre-show

period to make sure all the dogs are ready for the event? And are there any concerns about barking dogs interfering with the concentration of the horses and riders?

**Dogs are animals, not robots, and like any sensitive, thinking animal, can be unpredictable, no matter how much training they have received. That said, we are firmly committed to providing Can-Am and its attendees with a thoroughly entertaining, professional programme.**

7. Dogs and horses are a natural fit on the farms of the nation. But performing together in an entertainment context is decidedly unusual, and that means there will be a lot of interest in this year's relay at the Can-Am. What sorts of preparations do you expect to undertake to produce a rousing show for the crowds?

**With the assistance of some of the Can-Am riders, we have set up a practice session that will give all of us—people, dogs and horses—an opportunity to meet and socialize. We will also take that opportunity to gather everyone together for a rehearsal before the show. We are confident that the Can-Am audience will enjoy watching majestic animals like horses running alongside natural athletes and comedians like dogs. It will truly be an unforgettable experience. There's something magical that happens when horses and dogs interact: it's touching, funny, and exciting all at the same time. The addition of the human element—riders and handlers—makes it even more fascinating to watch.**