



HEELWORK TO MUSIC

Musical Freestyle - Dancing with Your Dog

By Cynthia Jameson



Musical freestyle is a relatively new sport that combines dog obedience and dance in a way that is totally unique and exciting. It blends dog obedience and dance presenting a visually exciting display of handler and canine teamwork. The handler and dog perform dance-oriented footwork in time to the music, rather than displaying the traditional walking pace of obedience. Heeling is an important component of freestyle but nonstandard movements are also expected to be displayed by the dog along with attention, enthusiasm, and a degree of difficulty over and above that which is normally seen in the obedience ring. A variety of handler upper body movements are also encouraged to lend interpretation to the music. Costuming for the handler also helps to enhance the interpretation of the music and to involve spectators in the spirit of the routine. Throughout the routine the handler may encourage the dog's performance with verbal commands, but no training aids or food of any kind are permitted in the competition ring.

Don't be confused and think that Musical freestyle is "freestyle heeling." In freestyle heeling, the focus is placed on the dog's heel position and the dog's execution of heeling patterns to music. Showcasing the dog's talent is the primary objective, with the handler's role remaining quite understated. Musical freestyle is not heeling with music in the background. MCSI rules encourage the dog to move out of the heel position to perform a variety of movements and tricks not found in a traditional obedience performance. The handler freely uses the body, arms, and legs to interpret the music. Footwork is a mixture of dance-related steps and traditional movements at different speeds. Because of the freedom for both the canine and human partners, musical freestyle routines incorporate creativity and diversity of movement. Emphasis is placed on the teamwork between the handler and dog; neither partner is "showcased," since both are judged equally.

Musical freestyle is a competitive sport. A handler and dog team may compete in three different classes at three different levels. Classes include Individual (one handler, one dog), Brace, (two handlers, two dogs) and Team (three or more handlers, each with a dog). In 1995, a Tandem class (one handler, two dogs) is also offered in the Exhibition Only category. Participants may begin competing with a dog in any class, in either the On-leash or Off-leash Divisions, but must qualify from the Off-leash Division to enter Masters. Titles of MFD (Musical Freestyle Dog), MFX (Musical Freestyle Excellent) and MFM (Musical Freestyle Master) are awarded to dogs, based on the accumulation of qualifying scores specific to each of the different classes.

Origin of this sport is being claimed by UK and Canada when two separate groups of individuals became interested in merging obedience, music, and dance choreography. In 1994, the dream of an international organization was realized with the adoption of MCSI rules and guidelines by the Illini Obedience Association from the United States. Music selection is the beginning step in creating a freestyle routine. Any type of music or medley of selections can be used to create a 3-6 minute performance. Instrumental or vocal music with a strong beat is the easiest to interpret. Selecting music



to complement the dog's (and handler's) abilities is highly recommended; choosing music you will want to hear even after many times of repeat playing is also suggested.

While some movement experience and a sense of rhythm is helpful, being a dancer is not necessary. When performing, the handler must interpret the music and show some variation in speed and footwork when moving in time with the music. Observing dance performances of any type can give you ideas for routines. Using local resources such as dance school teachers or ethnic dance groups in conjunction with your obedience coach can be helpful when developing and executing a new freestyle routine.

Nor does your dog have to be a top-ten in obedience to participate in musical freestyle. If the dog is reasonably accomplished in heeling and has mastered novice level exercises, then the dog will be ready for a routine in the On-leash Division. The addition of nonstandard movements such as backing or heeling on the right enhances the degree of difficulty of the routine, leading to a higher score. In the Off-leash and Masters Divisions, the dog must be capable of working off-leash as well as be able to accurately perform a variety of nonstandard movements such as weaving, twisting, or circling.

Musical freestyle routines are judged for their technical execution and artistic impression. In judging technical execution, the judges consider a number of details of the performance such as 1) difficulty of the movements 2) precision in execution of movements by dog and handler 3) dog's attitude and enthusiasm. The judging of artistic impression focuses on: 1) choreography 2) interpretation of the music by the handler 3) synchronization of the handler's and dog's movements with the music.

The judges also consider the handler's attire or costume and whether it is appropriate to the routine. One, two, or three judges review the routine; if there are two or more judges, each judge individually scores the routine, then the scores are averaged to give the final score. A qualifying score of 60% in the Off-leash and Masters Divisions and 55% in the On-leash Division is required for the accumulation of points towards titles. MCSI's objective is to provide a venue for a different kind of dog sport, one which spectators can observe and enjoy with little knowledge of the technical elements, and one in which any handler with a reasonably well trained dog and a sense of rhythm can participate.

A typical Heelwork to Music Classlist looks like this:

- 1) Starters Heelwork to Music
- 2) Starters Freestyle
- 3) Novice Heelwork to Music
- 4) Novice Freestyle
- 5) Intermediate Heelwork to Music
- 6) Intermediate Freestyle
- 7) Advanced Heelwork to Music
- 8) Advanced Freestyle.

