

There's Just 1 Top Dog

Trainers And Their Furry Pals Compete In The Purina Challenge

By LYNN PORTER
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ST. PETERSBURG — He ran. He jumped. He maneuvered.

He's Ace, a border collie with a heart — and fancy footwork.

Ace and his trainer, Christopher Matthews, 16, of Tarpon Springs competed Saturday in the agility portion of the Purina Dog Chow Incredible Dog Challenge.

Winners at this, the Eastern regionals, go on to the national competition in St. Louis, Mo.

Ace and Matthews were pitted against other dog-trainer teams, including Wendy Pape, 41, of Tampa and her dog, Surf. Pape helped Matthews train his dog at K-9 Educational Training Center of Hillsborough.

"It's awesome. It's truly fun," Matthews said.

Modeled on horse jumping, the competition requires dogs to run an obstacle course following trainers. The dogs listen for verbal commands from trainers and watch their body language to determine which way they should turn.

The dog-trainer teams are faulted if the animals don't complete the course to regulations. They also compete for the best time.

The action drew hundreds to Spa Beach.

"The equipment is flashy, and some of these dogs are flying," Pape said.

Matthews and Ace did well but not good enough to move on to the nationals, as first place finishers Pape and Surf will.

But Matthews was optimistic about competing.

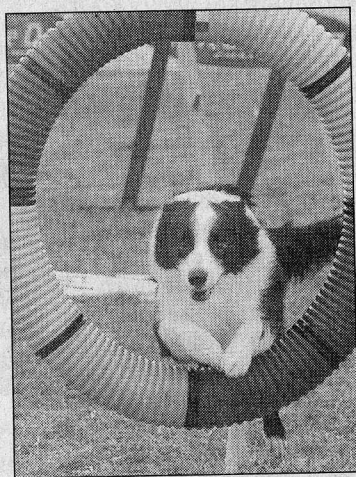
"It's just another dog out there, another great dog to beat — or try to," he said.

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Tribune photos by BRUCE HOSKING

Michele Feimster gives Petey, a 5-year-old mixed breed, special attention before the Purina Dog Chow Incredible Dog Challenge on Saturday with his trainer, Victor Fann of Jacksonville, right.



Ace, a 3-year-old border collie from Tarpon Springs, makes the obstacle course look easy. Ace and trainer Christopher Matthews, 16, placed third in Saturday's competition.



Wendy Pape and Surf stand atop the first place platform after the competition. They will compete nationally. Pati Mah and Kwik placed second, and Matthews and Ace proudly claim third.