SURRENDERED to a rescue group at a year old, Woody had issues.

The sheltie refused to enter crates, feared people and was anxious about new situations. And he had boundless energy. Without a large amount of mental and physical stimulation, Woody would whine, bark and pace.

He “clearly did not know how to have a bond with a person,” says Charles Case of Gaithersburg, Maryland. “But deep inside I could tell Woody desperately wanted ... to be loved.”

Fortunately, Case was up to the challenge. He already enjoyed agility training with his sheltie, Levi. He hoped the sport would satisfy Woody’s activity needs and make him a more relaxed, confident dog.

“Participating in agility—and also training in obedience—truly allowed Woody to blossom,” says Case. “He learned to enjoy resting in a crate and comfortably visiting with other dogs and people.”

Several months post-adoption, the pair was winning blue ribbons in competitions. “Through agility, we have developed an amazing relationship,” Case says.

With their strong drive to work and play, dogs like Woody can be a handful. But in the world of dog sports, those same qualities become assets. Bobbie Bhambre, director of DogCentric Training in New York, has seen many “problem dogs” transformed through sports training. For the owner, sports can turn the chore of training into an enjoyable hobby. “It’s a lot of fun discovering your dog’s personality as they learn new skills,” Bhambre says.

If you have a seemingly indefatigable pup, consider canine performance sports as a way to provide an outlet for his energy, mitigate behavioral issues and enhance your bond with your pet. Agility, dock diving, disc dog, flyball, obedience, rally, freestyle, canine nose work, tracking, lure coursing, treibball and herding are just some of the options. They’re open to all dogs and feature competitions nationwide. And in competitions, rescued dogs have won top honors.

FOR THE SPORT OF IT

When choosing a sport, first consider your dog’s preferences. While your dog may enjoy an activity you thought he wouldn’t, if he’s terrified of water, he’s probably a poor candidate for dock diving.

Aggressive or reactive dogs may not be suited for canine competitions and training events, which can be loud and crowded. However, training in a safe setting—such as a secure backyard or in private lessons—can help fearful or reactive dogs develop the social skills that enable them to participate in group situations. Bhambre’s rescued kelpie, Charlotte, used to bark and lunge at people. “Agility helped to build her confidence and gave me additional tools to help a nervous, reactive dog,” she says. “To this day, when she sees agility equipment, Charlotte is immediately accepting of all the people and dogs she sees there and is
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excited to be in that environment.”

Even dogs with physical limitations can benefit from sports. After Case adopted Woody, a visit to the vet revealed that the sheltie had mild hip dysplasia. By lowering jumps and respecting his dog’s limits, Case was able to increase Woody’s flexibility.

CANINE PERFORMANCE CONNECTIONS

Once you’ve found a sport that interests you, start attending competitions. Every weekend, dog sports competitions occur nationwide, and most competitors will gladly refer spectators to local training clubs and upcoming events.

Your veterinarian and local shelter may also be good resources. Offering more than 40 classes a week, including agility and flyball, the Richmond SPCA has become a “hub of the performance-dog community,” says Sarah Babcock, chief of education and training for the Virginia shelter. As a result, she adds, many high-energy dogs at the shelter have found new homes with people attending classes.

How far you and your dog go in a new sport will depend on his abilities and your goals, available time and interest. And although most sports allow any dog to compete, your dog’s body type will often determine how competitive he can be. So know that while your Pekingese-dachshund mix might love agility competitions, she’s less likely to bring home blue ribbons than the average border collie.

Whether you wish to compete or simply to find a fun outlet for your canine friend, the extent of the activity is more important than the extent of the competition. If you and your dog take frequent lessons and practice at home most days of the week, your dog will benefit from the mental and physical engagement. And you will benefit from an enhanced bond with your best friend. And what could be more rewarding than that?

Kathryn Schneider (kathryn@ethospheres.com) is president of Ethospheres, a policy and public relations firm that serves nonprofit organizations, including animal shelters. She has shown her dogs in agility for nearly 14 years.

DOG SPORTS OVERVIEW

These are just some of the options in canine performance sports. No matter the sport, all training should be positive and enhance your dog’s confidence.

AGILITY: In competitions, you direct your dog through a series of obstacles with the goal of having no knocked bars and completing obstacles in sequence.

CANINE FREESTYLE: Like to dance with your dog? In canine freestyle competitions, you and your dog perform a choreographed routine to music.

CANINE NOSE WORK: A great sport for dogs with physical limitations, nose work puts your pup’s snout to the test with scent detection challenges.

DOCK DIVING: Have a water-loving canine? In this sport, dogs run down a platform and leap into a pool, with top honors to those who jump farthest or highest.

FLYBALL: In fast-paced relays, teams of four dogs race against each other to leap four hurdles and retrieve a ball from a spring-loaded flyball box.

RALLY OBEDIENCE: Take basic obedience to the next level with rally obedience, where you and your dog negotiate commands arranged in a sequence by the judge.

TREIBBALL: Also known as urban herding, treibball (pronounced “try-ball”) features canines moving giant inflated balls under the direction of their handlers.