

# TORONTO STAR

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## SPORTS

# ‘In it for the treats’: Ratting, where dogs sniff out live rats for awards, is making a comeback

Ratting has been brought back as a sport and, like all things dog-related in the pandemic, it seems to be growing in popularity.

By **Kerry Gillespie** Sports Reporter

Fri., April 15, 2022 | ⌚ 4 min. read

## JOIN THE CONVERSATION

ARNPRIOR, Ont.—There aren’t many places in the world where shouting “rat” is immediately followed by cheers, applause and loving praise.

But “good job, good dog” is the standard chorus at a Rats! Canada competition where dogs sniff out live rats, which are kept unharmed inside plastic tubes, nestled between bales or hidden under piles of straw. The skill comes in not falling for the decoy tubes that are empty or contain smelly rat litter, and signalling the live rat clearly so the owner can yell “rat” and, if correct, stop the clock.

In the days before dogs wore coats and matching booties and ate gourmet kibble, most of them had jobs and one of those was hunting down rats and other vermin in barns and fields. Ratting has been brought back as a sport and, like all things dog-related in the pandemic, it seems to be growing in popularity.

Barn hunt, as a sport, was created in the U.S. and the Canadian version — which offers simpler events that are accessible to dogs of all breeds, sizes and ages — started in Quebec in 2015.

An event last Saturday saw a 17-pound wire-haired dachshund competing with a 165-pound Irish wolfhound. There was a Belgian Malinois who was purchased to compete in agility and obedience sports but prefers the scent work of finding rats in makeshift barns, and a rescue dog from the Bahamas whose owner uses sports to help bring her out of her shell.



Terriers, who were originally bred for this kind of work, tend to instinctively be very good at this sport. Case in point: Penny, a Jack Russell terrier, growls and bites at the tube when she finds one with a live rat and has to be carried away.

But every dog can smell the rat when it enters the ring, said Marie-Claire Guindon, national chair for Rats! Canada, the governing body that sets the rules and maintains the rankings.

Some dogs just need more training to teach them what to do when they smell the rat and, in some cases, overcome other lessons that owners teach their dogs while out walking, such as “don’t chase that squirrel,” she said.

She breeds Doberman pinschers (originally bred to protect a tax collector) and also breeds rats specifically for use in dog sports.



While some may worry about the welfare of the rats, Guindon says she breeds and trains them so they're comfortable in the tube, which they enter on their own, and they spend no more than an hour in there before they are swapped out. "They're pets and treated as such," she said of her rats, who all have names and live in her home.



Honing and testing natural instincts through a range of dog sports can provide dogs with mentally and physically engaging activities and owners with a fun hobby. But working with a dog also deepens the bond between animal and owner, enthusiasts say.

Pamela Burns has been involved in dog sports for more than 20 years. She comes from a hunting and fishing family, and when she announced that she was getting a dog, her brothers assumed it would be a Labrador retriever. “Not exactly,” she said, smiling.

She’s competing with her two wire-haired dachshunds, Lieder and Ella Mae.

“Dachshunds are actually a hunting breed. Most people don’t know that and treat them like couch potatoes,” Burns said, noting they were bred in Europe to hunt badgers and even wild boar.

“I’ve always been interested in dogs working and not just dachshunds, which are my passion. I want to see dogs do what they were bred to do. They need an outlet for their hunting instincts and without that, they get frustrated and that sometimes leads to bad behaviour.”



Arlo, a five-year-old German shepherd, is particularly fast at finding the live rat and there's no doubt he's done the job because he picks up the container — he's one of the few dogs here with a jaw big enough to do that — and looks ready to take it home.

“If the rat got out of the container he'd still hold the container,” his owner Karen Wood said.

At their farm outside Ottawa he has a pet chicken — named Kevin, courtesy of her grandson — and a barn with plenty of wild rats that Arlo never bothers with. “It's not that I really want him to kill them but sometimes I wouldn't mind,” Wood said.



Arlo is a working line German shepherd who was bred for military and police work but didn't make the cut as a puppy. "He was rejected for not having enough prey drive," she said, laughing. "That's how I got him."

Like many of the dog-owner teams here, Arlo and Wood compete in a variety of sports, including dock diving, agility, tracking, obedience and sprinter.

Some of them are more challenging – for dog and owner – and others, like dock diving and Rats! Canada events are "just fun," Wood said. "I get to go places and meet new people and all the girls become Arlo's girlfriends."

And a bit like the experience of parents who introduce their children to multiple sports to see where their passion lies, it's the dogs, owners here say, that choose what they like best.



That's why Freyja, a Belgian Malinois, is here ratting, where she picked up championship titles in two events.

"She was bought for agility and obedience sports and she'll do those under duress but this she loves," said Paul Beard.

"It was not hard to train her to find the rat."

What's more troublesome, it seems, is getting her to sit still in front of the event backdrop for a photo with her award ribbons.

"This is (the) hardest part at the end, trying to get a good picture with the ribbons," Beard said. "This is for us, of course. The dogs don't care; they're just in it for the treats."



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