

UP FRONT | DANCING WITH DOGS

POOCHES DAZZLE ON DANCE FLOOR — EVEN WITH THEIR TWO LEFT FEET

■ Man's best friend is cutting the rug (rather than chewing on it) during this weekend's World Canine Freestyle dance competition in Lakeland.

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Sydney Messett spins around the dance floor in top-hatted style to *Puttin' On the Ritz*, her feet following the carefully choreographed routine she has practiced for months with her dance partner: her 3-year-old dog, Romeo.

Dancing with dogs — or canine freestyle, as aficionados call it — is an emerging sport in the dog world, with Messett among its more recent devotees.

As part of the newly formed Miami-based Furri-Canes dog dance team, she and Romeo, a tiny white and brown Papillon with shiny black eyes, headed to Lakeland this weekend to compete at the World Canine Freestyle Organization's North American National Competition and the Santa Paws Review.

Believe it or not, more and more people are dancing with their dogs.

The organization that began five years ago in New York with 13 members has grown to about 1,000, with 14 clubs worldwide — some as far away as Japan, Holland, Australia and Canada.

"When I heard of it I thought it



MARICE COHN BAND/HERALD STAFF

BUSTING A MOVE: Romeo, a papillon, dances with its owner, Sydney Messett, this week in Miami.

■ **HERALD.COM:** SEE A PHOTO GALLERY OF THE DANCING DOGS

• **TURN TO DOGS, 2A**

Pooches dazzle on dance floor

• DOGS, FROM 1A

was a little strange, but it's fun," said Furri-Cane member Candy Veilleux, a student at Robert Morgan Educational Center in South Miami-Dade, who dances with her Australian Shepherd, Lollipop. "When I tell people at school, they say, 'What? You dance with your dog?'"

Dog dancers expect to put up with a little joshing — OK, a lot of joshing — but they're serious about their sport.

"Dog people don't think you are crazy, but others do," Messett said. "I'm not into golf and I see people spending thousands of dollars on equipment and hitting all those balls and I think they are crazy. It's a matter of what strikes your fancy."

The World Canine Freestyle Organization, or WCFO, was founded in 1999 in Brooklyn by Patie Ventre — a former publicist for dog sporting events who once was a ballroom dancer.

Canine freestyle caught on in the early 1990s, she said, gaining popularity after dog owners saw demonstrations of dance routines at agility and other competitions.

Ventre said three teams from Florida are part of the organization: The Sidekicks in Lakeland, The Canine Fancy Dancers in Daytona and now The Furri-Canes, founded by Messett.

"This is a very new thing, but it's catching on fast," Messett said. "You can do it at any age and to your favorite music. The dogs love to show



IF YOU GO

What: The 2004 World Canine Freestyle Organization's National Competition and the Santa Paws Review

Where: Lakeland

When: 9:30 a.m.-5 p.m. today

Who: The Miami Furri-Canes and two other Florida teams will be competing

Admission: Free

For more information: Go to worldcaninefreestyle.org or call 718-332-8336

MORE ONLINE

For a photo gallery of the prancing pooches, go to Herald.com

off."

Dancers say it's a fun way to bond with their best friends.

"All of us are just so obsessed with anything we can do with our dogs," Veilleux said.

Messett, a dog obedience trainer who started The Furri-Canes in June, said she heard about the trend from friends, then one day decided to give it a try. She ordered instructional videos and books, and Romeo has been her partner ever since.

The duo participated in two competitions, including one in Lakeland last year where they took first place in the beginners division, she noted proudly.

When she couldn't find a group to join in Miami, she formed her own.

The Furri-Canes, a group of 10 women ranging in age from the teens to the mid-60s,

started meeting once a month to dance with their dogs.

Soon, the group was meeting several times a month and rehearsing a full two-minute dance routine choreographed by Messett.

"It doesn't look complicated, but it is," Messett said.

First the women learn the routine — a feat, since most say they aren't trained dancers — and then they must teach the moves to their dogs. The dogs learn the steps one at a time and later as a routine.

About half of the dogs have been trained in obedience or agility, but others have no previous training.

Coordination is key, particularly in the case of The Furri-Canes, which Messett said will field one of the largest teams — 10 women and 10 dogs of all sizes, from the tiniest Papillon to the biggest Golden Retriever. Most teams

have about five people.

"It was probably the hardest thing I have done," laughed Marsha Daker, a retired Miami-Dade police officer who dances with her English Bulldog, Grace.

"It's difficult to get everybody to do it all together."

The team will be competing in the beginners division, performing a "heelwork-to-music" routine — an exacting type of competition involving spins and other moves that form patterns on the dance floor.

Dogs cannot be more than four feet from their owners during the routine.

And costumes are a must — for people and their pups.

The Furri-canines' costume is black pants, white shirts, purple vests and sparkly black top hats for humans, tuxedo-style handkerchiefs and sparkly paw cuffs for dogs.

Four members of the group also will compete in the individual category — where creativity is rewarded.

In the case of Daker and her bulldog, Grace, this means cha-cha-cha-ing to a tune crooned by Enrique Iglesias while both are dressed in vivid orange, pink and blue.

"Grace is very animated and loves to do anything that is fast and fun," Daker said.

After months of rehearsal, the team is headed for its first competition with a national dog-dancing title at stake.

"I am a little nervous," Furri-Cane member Marilyn Leff said with a laugh.

"We will keep our paws crossed."