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John Kirkland of Cambridge, an MIT professor who teaches Frisbee, shows his world championship form in the contest.



A little bit of body English helps eight-year-old David Holmes of Mattapan. (Globe photos by Ulrike Welsch)



Checkers, trained by owner B. J. Comerford, proves that it doesn't take two hands to handle a Frisbee.



Daryl Elliott of Reading keeps his eye on the Frisbee he's balancing during yesterday's competition on the Charles.

Thousands flip at Frisbee throw

By Robert J. Rosenthal
Globe Staff

The way Dave Johnson tells it, his instincts for Frisbee-throwing surfaced early in life.

"My mother says I was born throwing," Johnson, 26, said yesterday. "I'm told I used to flip Gerber baby food lids around. And I've been throwing a Frisbee ever since I was a kid."

Yesterday Johnson, who is the world champion distance thrower (412 feet aided by a good wind, he says) and several thousand other people spent a Frisbee-filled afternoon watching and participating in the Great Cambridge Frisbee Throw.

The event, held at Christian Herter Park along the Charles River in Cambridge, was sponsored by radio station WCAS and the Underground Camera store.

During the afternoon there were two organized events, a distance toss and a special competition for Frisbee-catching dogs. The dogs stole the show, drawing great applause and cheers for their panting, leaping antics.

Undaunted, the humans for the most part seemed to enjoy themselves just as much. At

times it seemed to be raining Frisbees. Frisbee-throwing is a soft, silent sport and under the blue sky, warm sun and soft breeze the banks of the Charles took on an elysian air.

Johnson, who is a professional Frisbee thrower — there are autograph model Frisbees out with his name on them — ran yesterday's events along with John Kirkland, another champion Frisbee player.

Frisbees are thrown, at least by casual players, somewhat in the way a pie plate would be thrown. In fact, the first Frisbees were pie plates made by the Frisby pie company in Connecticut.

Frisbee throwers yesterday displayed many styles. There were the standing throwers, the running throwers, the powerful wristers and the not-so-powerful.

But all the styles have the sort of classical grace one associates with a discus thrower except that there is no twirling reverse and release. Instead there is a backhanded snap release with the forefinger used as a guide.

The style of dogs is a different matter. They all catch a Frisbee with their mouths and

none present yesterday could throw at all. For dogs, catching a Frisbee is all in the coordination of eye and mouth.

Tasha, a German Shepard from Brookline, had good form but made a bad tactical error before the competition began. She couldn't restrain herself and ran after every Frisbee in sight. By the time she was supposed to be serious, Tasha was panting a lot and her tongue was hanging out.

Paul Sibek, who has been training Tasha to catch Frisbees since she was a pup, had hoped Tasha would get her big break yesterday.

"She's pretty much a natural," Sibek said. "She's absolutely the best. She's the best dog here. I've got a lot of confidence in her. The only thing I'm worried about is these poodles. Tasha was traumatized by a poodle when she was a puppy and they could throw her catching off."

Later, a disconsolate Sibek watched Tasha try to refresh herself in the Charles. Shaking his head he said, "I can't understand it. She never got so tired before. I guess she Frisbeed herself out."