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'I can't wait to yell, "Mush, mon!" in support of our team.' — singer Jimmy Buffett

Cool Runnings 2: Jamaican operator to start dogsled tours

By Gay Nagle Myers

Here are the ingredients for a true, only-in-Jamaica story: abandoned dogs, a Jamaican tour operator with a vision, a sled-dog championship in Scotland, Jimmy Buffett, Chris Blackwell and an international film festival.

The story began last year, when Danny Melville, founder and chairman of Chukka Caribbean Adventures in Ocho Rios, Jamaica, was in Edmonton, Alberta, on a scouting expedition for custom-made dune buggies to use in one of his firm's new tours.

He spotted an odd-looking dogsled -- and a light bulb went on.

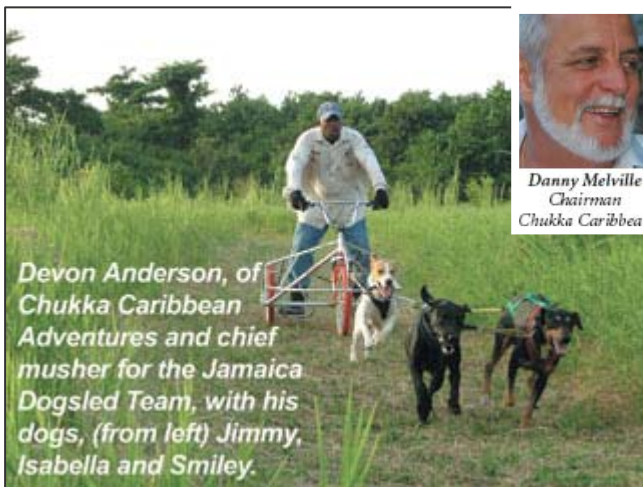
"It turns out that the sled was designed for dry-land racing," said Melville. "I was told that in Scotland they used the sleds for tourists, and I felt that if they could do it in Scotland, we could do it in Jamaica."

Melville's next stop: Scotland's Loch Ness region, where he met with Alan Stewart, chairman of the Cairngorm Sled-Dog Adventure Co.

"I watched him give rides to tourists," Melville said. "I knew then and there that a dogsled team not only would be a great soft adventure attraction for Chukka but also a catalyst for 'Brand Jamaica,' much in the way Jamaica's bobsled team has been."

With that, the Jamaica Dogsled Team was born. Devon Anderson, Chukka's director of operations, went to Scotland last June for an intensive training period to learn how to become a musher, or driver; how to run a dogsled team; and how to care for and train sled dogs.

Anderson, known around the Chukka operation as Dr. Doolittle or the Horse Whisperer, was selected "because of his unique abilities and connections with animals, especially horses and dogs," said Melville.



Devon Anderson, of Chukka Caribbean Adventures and chief musher for the Jamaica Dogsled Team, with his dogs, (from left) Jimmy, Isabella and Smiley.

*Danny Melville
Chairman
Chukka Caribbea*

For his part, Stewart -- who last August traveled to Jamaica with his son and a musher from the U.S., to teach the Jamaicans the art of dogsledding -- recommended that Jamaica take the bold next step of sending Anderson to the Siberian Husky Club of Great Britain's Sled Dog Rally in Aviemore, Scotland, the biggest dogsled event in Europe.

"This turned out to be much more than just an opportunity to offer a dynamic new tour at Chukka Caribbean," said Melville. "It was a chance for Jamaica to once again command the attention of the world in a sport that is traditionally a winter sport," referring to the Jamaican bobsled team that competed in the 1988 Winter Olympic Games in Calgary, Alberta.

Enter singer and entrepreneur Jimmy Buffett and Island Records founder Chris Blackwell, who stepped in as team sponsors. Blackwell praised the team concept as a "terrific idea and wonderful publicity for Jamaica."

Buffett said he had "missed out on the bobsled years, and I don't intend

to miss out on this one. I can't wait to yell, 'Mush, mon!' in support of our team."

Although Anderson's ragtag team of mongrel strays, rescued by the Jamaican Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, could not accompany him to Scotland because of U.K. quarantine regulations, the 42-year-old Jamaican, who had never before seen snow, traveled to the Scottish highlands in January to compete against 220 other teams and 1,000 huskies on a rain-soaked 4.5-mile course around Glenmore Forest.

Devon Anderson, Chukka's director of operations, went to Scotland last June to learn how to become a musher.

Anderson and his borrowed four-husky dog team came

in 27th out of a field of 40 entrants in his class. He finished in 45 minutes, 52 seconds, despite having to stop for five minutes to take a tired dog off the reins and calm another dog that had been frightened by spectators on the track.

No problem, mon. Anderson returned to Jamaica as a hero, already looking toward more competitions that could possibly lead to the Winter Olympics in 2010.

Blackwell, who also is CEO of Palm Pictures, acquired the rights to "Sun Dogs," a documentary film that chronicles the story of the dogsled team's struggles and adventures, following the canine crew from Jamaica to the competition in Scotland. The film will premiere at the Toronto Film Festival on Sept. 7.

"We saw the footage and thought it was an incredible story that has a lot of humor," Blackwell said.

"It's the ultimate underdog story, with a fierce Jamaican attitude, a mix of 'Cool Runnings' [the 1993 film inspired by the Jamaican bobsled team], 'The Bad News Bears' and 'Dr. Doolittle.'"

Chukka's dogsled tours will showcase the team's abilities and the Jamaican countryside.

Producer and director Andrea Stewart said that "Sun Dogs" will document "the unique dual spirit of Jamaica, a cool place with a hard edge. Despite chronic struggle, its character shines through its vibrant culture. Its humor and confidence fascinate us, as Jamaicans take on challenges from bobsled to dogsled."

The true stars of the film, of course, are the Sun Dogs themselves. There's Jimmy, named after Jimmy Buffett, who runs alongside Smiley as one of the lead dogs; Bruno and Marbles, who are brother and sister; and Chukka, Rusty, Tallowa, Isabella and Big Ears.

The dogs now live in comfort at Chukka Cove Farm in Ocho Rios and soon will be joined by more four-legged team members.

A limited number of dogsled tours will be available at Chukka later this year for visitors and will showcase the team's abilities and the Jamaican countryside.

For information about the Jamaica Dogsled Team, visit www.jamaicadogsled.com; for Chukka Caribbean Adventures, visit www.chukkacaribbean.com.

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When Chukka Caribbean Adventures unveils its dogsled tours later this year, cruise lines are hoping to offer the tour to their passengers. Discussing the topic in Jamaica were, from left, Brendan Corrigan, Carnival's senior vice president; singer Jimmy Buffett, a sponsor of the Jamaica Dogsled Team; and Danny Melville, Chukka's chairman and team founder.

Chukka Caribbean Adventures expands into Turks and Caicos

Chukka Caribbean Adventures, which operates 28 land-based nature tours in Belize, the Bahamas, Montego Bay and Ocho Rios, Jamaica, recently expanded its operations to Grand Turk, in Turks and Caicos.

"Development of the new Grand Turk Cruise Center offered an opportunity for the Chukka team to fill a need for new leisure tours," said Danny Melville, Chukka's founder and chairman.

The firm's horseback swim-and-ride tour takes riders along Grand Turk's northeast ridge. A 4-by-4 safari tour explores Cockburn, Turks and Caicos' capital city, along with Grand Turk's salt flats, home to pink flamingos and wild horses. A dune-buggy safari follows a course along the island's beaches and rocky coastline.

To book the tours, visit www.chukkacaribbean.com. -- G.N.M.