

Jamaican musher defies odds to take 13th place in Yukon Quest

By [Matias Saari](#)

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Photo by [Eric Engman](#)



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FAIRBANKS — Newton Marshall belied his humble Jamaican upbringing by dreaming big. On Thursday morning, he finished the Yukon Quest in lucky 13th place.

“Finally, it’s over,” he said with a hearty laugh to a small crowd assembled at 6:26 a.m. in downtown Fairbanks.

Among the spectators were Hans Gatt, the Whitehorse, Yukon, musher who showed Marshall the ropes, and Danny Melville, the Jamaican adventure tours operator and brainchild of the project.

“I’m really proud of him. I can’t believe it. It’s still a bit surreal,” Melville said.

Added Gatt, who scratched midway through the Quest to save his team for the Iditarod: “There were a lot of obstacles to overcome, but I never thought that he wouldn’t make it.”

Not only did Marshall make it (something 10 mushers who have scratched can’t say), he brought 10 dogs to the finish and will earn \$3,000.

During the race, Marshall said keeping his feet dry through overflow and staying warm were big challenges. At the finish line, he said the hardest part was getting over Eagle Summit — something he, Colleen Robertia of Kasilof and Mark Sleightholme of England accomplished together in the dark Wednesday morning.

“I earned this,” Marshall said, giddy with joy.

The journey was far from easy for Marshall, 25, who grew up on a plantation and two years ago was illiterate. He also was temporarily removed from the Jamaica Dogsled Team after getting into trouble.

“This is definitely tough, and you have to have a really strong heart to want to do it,” he said, sporting a black spot of frostbite on his nose as evidence.

Asked whether he’ll continue mushing, Marshall responded “Yeah mon, most definitely.”

But shortly after watching Gatt start the Iditarod on March 7, his plans are to head home “to see some sunshine” before returning to work at Melville’s Chukka Caribbean Adventures, where he runs cart mushing tours with Jamaican mongrel shelter dogs.

An Iditarod run of his own is a possibility but hasn’t been discussed in depth yet with Melville or Gatt.

“We just want to finish this and then talk about the future. I assume that there is a future,” Gatt said.

From gardener to musher

Long story short: Marshall worked for Melville at Chukka Caribbean first as a gardener, then as a guide for horseback rides. When the person who cared for the dogs being trained for cart mushing left in 2005, Marshall filled the spot.

In the meantime, Melville created the Jamaica Dogsled Team and became interested in racing in North America. He met Quest Whitehorse executive director Stephen Reynolds, who put him in touch with three-time Quest champion Gatt, and a brash idea was formed: They would enter a Jamaican in the Quest. Marshall became the chosen one.

“People laughed at us pretty much,” Melville said about the initial reaction.

But the Jamaicans, with musician Jimmy Buffett funding much of the project, were dead serious.

“Once people realized that it wasn’t just some sort of a lark, that it was an actual serious attempt ... it’s been great for (Marshall) and the sport,” Reynolds said as he awaited Marshall’s arrival.

Having never seen snow, Marshall showed up in Minnesota to learn about the sport. Then he arrived at Gatt’s kennel south of Whitehorse two winters ago.

“Obviously, he had no clue what he got himself into. He just kept on going,” said Gatt, adding that Marshall quickly adapted to the unfamiliar cold.

Marshall also proved to be a quick learner in races, finishing around the middle of the pack in the 2008 Percy De Wolfe Memorial Race and 2009 Copper Basin and Sheep Mountain 150. He qualified for the Quest, and last summer, a representative of Gatt’s kennel was first to sign him up in Whitehorse for the race.

To aid him during the 1,016-mile journey, Gatt set him up with a laminated schedule of how long to run and rest and where to stop.

He strayed from the plan, however, by taking extra rest — as much for him as for the dogs — and reached Dawson City in 21st place. Marshall stuck closer to the plan in the second half and moved up in the standings as other mushers dropped out or slowed down.

He also handled well the attention from the public whose imagination was piqued by his quest. Like Japanese musher Yuka Honda, Marshall is the subject of a Quest documentary.

“Everybody’s encouraging. Everybody wanted to see me finish,” Marshall said.

Gatt attributed Marshall’s success to one thing.

“He built a bond with that team like very few mushers out there have, and that’s what got him to that finish line,” Gatt said.

Transformation

That Marshall bonded with Gatt’s huskies also is remarkable because dogs in Jamaica are lowly regarded and treating them humanely is an issue, Melville said.

“This story is about rescuing shelter dogs and also giving young Jamaicans a chance to see the world,” Melville said. “How else would a Jamaican kid like Newton end up in Alaska?”

He almost never made it, as Marshall was removed from the Jamaica Dogsled Team for 6-8 months after borrowing a car without permission, totalling it and then lying to try to cover the incident up, Melville said. Worse yet, he had taken the vehicle from the teacher who had taught him to read a couple years ago.

That’s ancient history, though.

“Newton will look you straight in the eye now and tell you an answer. He has become a man, a responsible guy,” Melville said. “He’s grown up. He’s a fine young man. I recommend him to anybody.”

Gatt agreed.

“He did become a different person, from somebody who would just blindly follow orders and not really think about anything,” Gatt said. “He does make his own decisions now, and I think that’s good for him.”

One of those decisions likely will involve a future Iditarod.

“He has earned the right to say, ‘You know, I think I’ll stay warm for a couple years and run the dogs on the beach’ ... and I wouldn’t blame him if he did,” Melville said.

Women trek on

The three women at the back of the pack made it over the Eagle Summit mountain pass on Thursday, greatly heightening their chances of reaching the finish line in Fairbanks.

Becca Moore of Willow and Iris Wood Sutton of Fairbanks reached Mile 101 Dog Drop on the Steese Highway at 3:17 and 3:30 p.m., respectively. Yuka Honda also

checked into Mile 101 at 8:45 p.m. after needing almost 20 hours to cover the 32 miles from Central. Most mushers made the trip in 5-6 hours.

Meanwhile, the news for Russ Bybee of Willow and Jason Mackey of Kasilof was bleak. Bybee scratched after bailing to the Steese Highway between Central and Eagle Summit, while Mackey was unable to get over Eagle Summit and scratched upon returning to Central on Thursday morning, 26 hours after initially leaving there. Mackey, the younger brother of four-time Quest champ Lance Mackey, could not overcome a multitude of problems, which included two dogs of his seven remaining dogs in heat at the end.

Expected in Fairbanks early this morning are Wayne Hall of Eagle, who would claim the final paying position of 15th place, and William Pinkham of Glenwood Springs, Colo.

Finishing hours before Marshall early Thursday morning in 11th through 13th places were French-Canadian Normand Casavant, Englishman Mark Sleightholme and Kasilof's Colleen Robertia, who blitzed the final stage faster than anyone in 5 hours flat.

Quest events

A Meet the Mushers event will be from 6-9 p.m. tonight at the Alpine Lodge on Dale Road. Mushers will autograph posters and merchandise at the free function.

Also, the Finish and Awards Banquet will be Saturday at the Carlson Center. Social hour and silent auction starts at 5 p.m., with dinner and awards beginning at 6 p.m. Tickets are \$60 and can be purchased at the Yukon Quest Alaska headquarters at 550 First Ave. or by calling 452-7954.