

Answering the Call of the Wild, Minus the Snow

By **STEPHEN REGENOLD**
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T. C. Worley for The New York Times

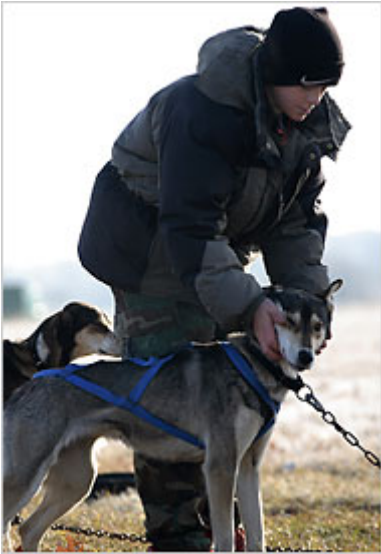
Jake Benson and his dog race their scooter at the East Meets West Dryland Challenge, basically dog sledding on wheels.

SIDE by side at the starting line, 2 men and 16 yipping dogs wait for the signal to run. “O.K., 10 seconds,” the announcer yells.

Harness straps pull tight on fur. Anxious cries echo off. “Five, four, three, two ... let 'em go!” Dust explodes in a cloud of sunbeams and silt. Lines jerk tight.

Legs kick, eyes craze, paws dig in. Humans hang on. Dogs bred to run and pull dash ahead, and rigs rocket down the track.

This is dryland dog racing. There is no snow on the ground, but some of the nation's top dog sledders — and their dozens of dogs — have come to the East Meets West Dryland Challenge in Brainerd, Minn., to run a 3.7-mile dirt track. They use wheeled carts made to mimic a sleigh on snow, some cranking along at speeds of 20 miles an hour or more.



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Caleb Tysver was first in the junior canicross.



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Amy Cooper with one of her dogs.

“Mushers now embrace the nonsnow disciplines as official competition,” said Dave Steele, executive director of the International Sled Dog Racing Association, or Isdra. Mr. Steele helped organize the two-day event in Brainerd, a national-level competition on the weekend of Nov. 18. Eighty-six teams traveled to the meet from the Midwest, New York, [Pennsylvania](#), [Colorado](#), [Canada](#), [South Korea](#) and, inevitably, [Jamaica](#) to compete for a \$5,125 prize purse.

Training dogs on grass and turf is nothing new. All serious dog sledders start preparing for race season long before the snow falls.

But a lack of reliable snow cover in the East and Upper Midwest the last couple of years has prompted a cancellation rate of more than 30 percent for Isdra-sanctioned races. Dryland competitions have gained prominence as racers realized the situation could be permanent.

“Used to be that December meant snowfall; you took it for granted, but not anymore,” said Steve Knight, a 59-year-old bus driver from Cambridge, Minn., who has raced dog

sleds since 1976. He came as a spectator to the East Meets West race. “Some of the biggest names in the sport now race dryland, and it’s turning into a whole other season before winter comes.”

Cart racing, the discipline that most resembles dog sledding, employs elaborate harness-and-line systems to keep three to eight dogs pulling steady. Three additional dog-powered disciplines — bike-jor, scooter and canicross — are run at races like East Meets West. Bike-jor and scooter tether canines to bikes and scooters, respectively, while canicross connects dog and human via an elasticized cord, hip belt and harness, creating six-legged man-dog teams that can run consistent five-minute miles on a dirt track.

This autumn, events in [Maine](#), New York, [Maryland](#), Ontario, [Wisconsin](#) and [Minnesota](#) offered a circuit of more than a dozen dryland competitions in North America. The Dryland World Championship, a two-day competition this weekend in Rastede, [Germany](#), is expected to draw 300 participants.

ON the second morning of the Brainerd race, dogs bellowed and howled in the parking lot beside the track. Frost glazed the ground, a chalky white over brown grass. Racers ran about, leashing dogs, checking carts, pouring water and food for parched or hungry packs.

“It’s gonna be a hot day for those dogs,” the announcer said, his amplified voice carrying into the lot.

Ronald Bernard, a 62-year-old lobsterman from Prince Edward Island, scooped some food from a large bag sitting beside his truck. Fourteen sled dogs murmured and whined over his head, each snug in its truck-bed kennel, noses poking out from caged cubbyholes.

Mr. Bernard had flown from Prince Edward Island to [Alberta](#) to pick up the dogs before driving two and a half days to Brainerd. “We hit an ice storm,” he said of the drive. “Trailer trucks were rolled in the ditches.”

Devon Anderson came from Jamaica. He is the captain of the Jamaica Dogsled Team, which is based in Ocho Rios and owned by Chukka [Caribbean](#) Adventures, a company that employs Mr. Anderson, 43, as a tour guide. “I was blown away the first time I got on this rig,” he said, motioning down at the team’s red cart. “The speed and the pull of these dogs, it’s like, whoa, amazing.”

Up the small rise from the parking lot through a gap in the fence, the day’s first competitors were sprinting into the finish area. The junior-class canicross division featured an abbreviated 0.8-mile course. Caleb Tysver, a 14-year-old from Battle Lake, Minn., who took first place in the division, ran the course in 5 minutes 53 seconds.

The adult canicross run was 1.7 miles, and Verde, a young Alaskan husky, pulled hard the whole way. “It’s a herky-jerky run, the dog bounding ahead, the line pulling at your back,” said Joshua Tesch, Verde’s 29-year-old owner and teammate from Superior, Wis. “The dog pulls you through the air during each stride.”

Mr. Tesch said he runs a mile 30 to 40 seconds faster when hooked up to his dog, averaging a five-minute-mile pace on trail.

Scooters were up next. The two-wheel and pedal-less contraptions come in a range of builds, some rough-looking and homemade. One or two dogs are connected to the front, and humans kick off the ground for speed, run alongside and ride. Voice commands keep the dogs running straight. “Hike! O.K., on-by, on-by, on-by let’s go,” one racer screamed coming out of the chute.

Bike-joring, the second speediest discipline after carting, connects dogs to the stem of a mountain bike. People pedal hard to hit speeds of more than 20 miles an hour, feeding off the dog’s running power to gain an extra burst.

Carts — the pseudosleds pulled by up to eight dogs — were the main attraction, with more than 30 teams competing for the biggest part of the prize purse. Spectators stood up in the bleachers when the first rigs

rolled in. Dogs strained at their lines, panting, whining, leaping with anxiety at the prospect of a run. Several handlers helped get each team to the start line.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the announcer piped in, “what you’re seeing here are some of the finest dogs in North America.”

Out of the gate, racing with four dogs for the first lap, Mr. Bernard ran a few steps and then jumped on, his dog pack providing ample power as he squatted and held on to handlebar grips.

Knobby wheels and 16 sprinting dog feet whipped up dust, the trail an exploding stream of brown grass and sand.

Mr. Bernard tucked and yelled at his pack, straining to catch the competition a few paces ahead. The carts rattled by a group of spectators standing downtrack. Dog paws drummed the ground.

Ten minutes later, Mr. Bernard’s team was visible in the distance, coming into the finish area and still lagging a few feet behind the competing cart. They crossed the line staggered, Mr. Bernard and his four dogs five seconds behind, but completing the 3.7-mile run in a respectable 10 minutes 41 seconds.

“I was yelling ‘gee’ and ‘haw,’ ” he said, smiling as he referred to the cries for right and left. “And a whole bunch of other nasty things I can’t repeat. But the dogs did well. We had a good run.”