

ONLINE PIONEER PLUS

Jamaican chos es dogsled heat over sunny beach

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By Meghan Balogh

Happy sled: Damion Robb competed last weekend in dogsled races in Marmora. Robb spends much of his winter racing dogsleds in Canada and the United States.

Photo by Megan

Balogh. Damion Robb could be at his home in the tropics. Instead, he is braving ice and snow to race sled dogs in Canada.

Robb raced in Marmora last weekend in the four-dog, four-mile sprint and the six-dog, six-mile sprint. He placed third in both heats.

“He’s a full-time dogsled tour guide in Jamaica,” says Daniel Melville, Robb’s boss and chairman of Chukka Caribbean Adventures in Ocho Rios, Jamaica. Melville traveled with Robb from Jamaica.

Unlike local dogsledders who train on snowy Ontario trails, Robb runs dogs in Jamaica with a dry land dogsled rig.

Melville discovered the device in Edmonton, inspiring him to begin the tours in Jamaica. Robb has been working with him for three years.

“I have always loved animals,” says Robb. “I wanted to be part of the dogsled tours.” In order to set up professionally, the company called in experts – Alan Stewart, who began dry land racing in Scotland a number of years ago, and Ken Davis, a competitive musher from Twig, Minnesota.

In 2007, Davis brought Robb to North America to race. “I only did dry land races in



the States first,” says Robb. “Then I went back to Jamaica in November, and came back in December for winter races in Canada and the States.”

Davis travels with Robb as a coach and trainer, providing dogs and a sled for his use. “I’m jealous I don’t get to run, but I’m also proud and glad to have him,” says Davis. “I won’t trust my dogs to just anybody.”

Davis has a total of 23 dogs in his kennel, and travelled to Marmora with 14. His dogs are Alaskan Huskies crossed with pointers. “These dogs were bred to do this,” says Robb. “Before they were born they wanted to pull and run.”

But the Jamaican dogs are just as happy to work, according to Robb. “These Huskies are a little bit different than our dogs. But physically, these dogs and our dogs do the same job.”

Ninety per cent of the canines used to pull the dry land rigs in Jamaica are rescued animals from local shelters.

“The dogs we use in Jamaica are mongrels,” Robb says affectionately. “Not all the dogs we get will do the job, but we only have one dog that won’t do it. You can’t force them, they must want to do it.” And almost all of them seem happy to have a job and to get a second chance at life.

Because of quarantine laws, if the Jamaican dogs left the country they would not be permitted back in. “And it would be cold for them here,” Robb adds.

Robb is not the only Jamaican who has left the tropics behind to race in the snow. Newton Marshall is the long-distance competitor on the Jamaican dogsled team, and recently qualified for the Yukon Quest, a 1,000-mile race.

Despite the success of both young men, Robb says the races are not about being number one.

“For us, it’s not a winning thing,” explains Robb. “We just want exposure, and more experience to become more professional at what we do. It’s more for our entertainment and helps to promote the company that I work for, and represent Jamaica, too.”

Robb, Davis and the dogs just finished two weeks of racing in Quebec and will continue on to Kearney, Haliburton, and Cannington before heading back to Minnesota to compete in more races.

On March 10 Robb flies back to Jamaica. “Back to my natural sunshine,” he says with a grin.