

Devon Anderson is mushing along

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Devon Anderson and his dog sled which will be featured in the Chris Blackwell film 'Sun Dogs'. - Contributed

LAID BACK and cool as Red Stripe beer on a hot day, Devon Anderson claims, laconically, that his life has changed very little since his boss - Danny Melville - inveigled him into dog sledding, and since his adventures have been chronicled in film.

Sun Dogs, the feature documentary dramatising the struggle and adventure of the founding of the Jamaica Dogsled Team, will premiere at the ReelWorld Film Festival (RWFF) in Canada on April 12.

The film has been singled out for a gala presentation and will be a festival highlight; the screening will be in Cinema 3 at Toronto's Rainbow Cinemas Market Square.

The film, Anderson states, "Is just something else. It does not make me feel any different. There is no excitement, like, wow I am in a movie."

The **Sun Dogs** story began when Jamaican Danny Melville, chairman and CEO of Chukka Caribbean Adventures, saw a unique sled designed for dry-land sled-dog racing and thought it would be a great idea for Jamaica. Melville put together a team of dogs - many of them strays from the Jamaica Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (JSPCA) - convinced Devon Anderson, the director of operations for Chukka Caribbean Adventures, who has a way with animals - to be a musher.

Anderson reveals that he grew up around animals including "dogs, cows, cats," so the idea of an adventure with dogs was not that far out. "Growing up, I always had dogs around just as pets."

He was born in Dressike, St. Mary, with a mother who was a dressmaker and taught at a basic school. His father worked for an exporter and did some farming.

At age 16, he left home for Trelawny, where he spent five years working with a grandfather who had horses and cows at home. His grandfather was a farmer who also worked as an overseer on the Good Hope Estate in Trelawny. Devon loved the horses and participated in a number of dressage competitions.

His dog sledding adventures began, he said, because Danny Melville was basically looking around for a new idea for his business, which is adventure tours for nature lovers.

Melville went to Canada in search of a dune buggy maker and came across a builder with a funny looking sled. The sled was designed to be pulled by dogs under dry conditions.

Melville was amazed, Devon Anderson reports, because "everyone knows dog sledding is a cold weather sport."

But, he was also excited and went on to locate Allan Stewart of Scotland who does dry land racing with dogs as part of a tourist attraction in that country.

Learning new things

Melville's next act was to call Devon and ask him, "How would you like to go and learn about dog sledding?"

Devon replied, "Isn't that something done on ice?"

Melville said it was possible on dry land and before long, Anderson was booked on a flight to Scotland where he spent two weeks being amazed at a sport he had never seen before.

Later, Allan Stewart would come to Jamaica to do further training with Devon and his colleagues from Chukka Caribbean Adventures.

After two weeks of training, Anderson came back to Jamaica to start looking for dogs here.

There was no special breed to select from for dog sledding here. Devon notes, "In the States, there is the Alaskan Husky and the Siberian, which are crossed with different hound breeds to get more power.

Concerned about the heat

"Here, we just have to look for dogs with longer legs and a powerful body. Right now, we use Jamaican mutts which are all mixed breeds - Rottweilers, German Shepherds, Doberman and Labradors. Except for the Labradors, they are all mixed."

Everyone who heard about the dog sledding effort was concerned about the heat.

Anderson notes, "In the States, the dogs run in the cold so it's fine. If it's not a certain temperature, they will not be allowed to run them."

The Jamaican dogs, however, proved to be "very, very good. Everybody was surprised when they saw them perform in heat. They have really done well in the weather."

The 12 Sun Dogs on the team, many of them strays from the JSPCA, have been given a new lease on life.

A good feeling

The JSPCA works closely with Chukka Cove and the team to monitor the dogs and the shelters.

Anderson went back to Scotland in 2005, this time for his first race. He notes, "I have done about three or four other races."

For the operations manager, it's now more than the (Chukka Cove) attraction. It's competitive and he has taken part in several more races in Minnesota.

"In my first race, I placed 27 out of a group of 60. There were different classes and ours was the four dog team." In the second race, his team placed second.

Anderson recalls, "It was a good feeling."

In his 2006 race, he placed sixth.

On the track, it's hard to plan to win, the musher states.

"I have competed in show jumping and usually you have the opportunity to walk the course and come up with different ideas before the actual competition. You can plan ahead. But, on the dog trail, no such opportunity exists. You are just put on sleds and told to go.

"You may meet upon a 90 degree corner going 15 miles an hour and right there you have to decide what to do. It's a challenge. You don't know what to expect. You aim not to have a spill, an accident, and to bring back the dogs safe."

Anderson wakes everyday and checks the dogs to see if they are OK. When handlers come in, they clean the dogs' stalls, making sure they have enough water and no injuries. The dogs are brushed and fed and later in the afternoon they are taken on a 20 to 25-minute run.

The animals are exercised once a day, everyday, with a break every two or three days days.

Children happy

"It is not a severe schedule," Anderson notes. "You have to train them to the point where they are always happy, always excited to go out, not exhausted and sour."

Anderson, a single father who has six children, lives at Chukka Cove where the dogs are housed. He says his children are excited and happy about his racing.

"They are pleased. The smallest, who is six years, is always playing around with the dogs."

His kids are looking forward to the film which chronicles his journey, also with fellow musher Newton Marshall, through the sled dog racing scene in Scotland and North America.

The film also provides a dramatic storyline around which a larger discussion about Jamaica's continuing social struggle is wrapped.

Anderson anticipates the film with his usual laid-back attitude. He says, "What I was yesterday, I remain. It has not changed me at all."