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Jamaican joy for husky rally organisers

A JAMAICAN who made history by becoming the first overseas competitor to take part in the annual Siberian Husky Rally at Glenmore has helped to ensure a bright future for the sport in the strath, claim organisers of this year's spectacle.

Devon Anderson braved wind and rain to eventually finish 27th in the four-dog class at the two-day rally around Glenmore Forest over the weekend.

The 42-year-old musher, from St Ann on the Caribbean island, totalled 45 minutes 52 seconds, beating the majority of the 80 entrants in his class.

The feat was all the more impressive as Anderson only took up the sport in June last year and his appearance at the rally was his first competitive outing.

The racer's only practice had been back home in St Ann where he trained a pack of eight dogs rescued from an animal welfare shelter to pull a rig across sugar cane fields.

His mentor, Cairngorm Sled Dog Adventure Centre owner Alan Stewart, had invited Anderson, the operations manager at Caribbean tourist group Chukka Cove tours, to take part in the event as part of a deal to see the sport established on the island.

The lack of snow saw mushers race three-wheeled rigs instead of their traditional sleds and the war conditions took their toll on the dogs.

After Anderson returned to his homeland on Monday, Mr Stewart said he was proud of the racer's achievements and the way he had coped with a series of problems encountered along the four-and-a-half-mile course.

During the first run, the musher saw his chances of a top 20 finish ruined when he lost around five minutes trying to take a tiring dog off the reins with less than a mile to go.

The bad luck continued on Sunday as one of the remaining three dogs was frightened by a couple of spectators who had encroached onto the track.

Despite the problems, Mr Stewart said that Anderson would be welcomed back in Jamaica as a hero.



"Devon did very, very well and he was terribly upset to see one of the four dogs tired out, but it's a race and even harder when it's your first go, " he said.

"Okay, Devon didn't win it, but that was never the plan. He said all along that he just wanted to finish the race and I'm extremely proud of him after the problems he had.

"He had the bottle to come and have a go at racing. Not many people would have done that, or would have done as well as he did."

The sled dog team's entrance in the event continued the unlikely trend of seeing athletes from the tropical country enter into winter sports.

Anderson's achievement emulated that of the now famous Jamaican bobsleigh team that took part in the 1988 Winter Olympics at Calgary, Canada, whose performance at the games inspired the 1993 film "Runners", starring the late John Candy.

The sled dog team received the backing of the Jamaican Government, while millionaire country singer Jimmy Buffett and Bob Marley's former record producer, Chris Blackwell, agreed to sponsor the venture.

Anderson's appearance at the event gave Badenoch and Strathspey national coverage as the musher appeared on Sky Sports, as well as BBC, ITV and Channel 4 news programmes.

The competition also received worldwide recognition as a photograph of Anderson training in the Cairngorms was taken by global news agency Reuters and took centre stage on the 40ft billboards on Times Square in New York.

"Devon being here has brought the biggest coverage the sport in the UK has ever seen, " Mr Stewart said.

"He was constantly being interviewed and his entrance for this race has been an unbelievable success only for boosting the area's profile but also for the sport in Jamaica.

"They did themselves proud and made history, but to think there was a billboard for the event up in Times Square is just mind-blowing."

The sled dog fanatic announced that on the back of the undoubted success, he was currently finalising a deal with the Scottish Sled Dog Federation to bring a second high-profile race to the strath next February.

The federation's international invitational event would see a team from America compete, as well as three sled dog world champions.

"We are aiming to make this place the capital of sled dog racing in the UK, " Mr Stewart said. "I could have taken Devon anywhere, but wanted to bring him to my backyard as it brought PR to the area we desperately need.

"The Jamaicans said that they'd be back again next year but to be able to hold two events, including an official recognised world event, would really put the strath on the map."

Anderson's appearance was one of a total of 222 teams that entered the 23rd Siberian Husky Club event hosted by the village.

Club secretary Penny Evans described this year's event as the best yet and that it had been a complete success.

"Everyone totally enjoyed it and Devon's performance was a fantastic achievement, " she said.

The event, supported by petfood supplier Royal Canin and The Easy Drinking Whisky Company, saw Cromdale's Sue Williams finish second in the two-to-three mixed sled dog breed race.

Ms Evans praised the organisation of the championships and paid particular attention to the inaugural sled dog procession that took place through Aviemore on Thursday.

Around 45 teams took part in the torchlit parade down Grampian Road that saw hundreds of people line the village and further afield line the streets to show their support.

Ms Evans said: "The procession was a brilliant idea and a real success.

Everyone felt it was a wonderful idea and were amazed by the turnout.

"We are in discussion about securing a sponsor for next year , and with everyone being willing, we will definitely be back."

Mr Jonathan Gatenby, Aviemore Business Association chairman, believes that this year's success will secure the rally's future in the area. It is estimated that around £250,000 is generated for the local economy by the three-day gathering.

"The whole event, especially the parade, was far bigger than we ever expected and attracted both tourists and people from across the strath to Aviemore, " he said The event had attracted people from across Scotland who come out for a day trip or weekend just to see the racing, he said. "This emphasises the economic importance of the event for the health of the village."

Mr Gatenby added: "The reality is the weekend gets so much publicity and coverage portraying Aviemore and Badenoch and Strathspey in a positive light that it can only be good for the area.

"I sincerely hope the club continue to hold the event here and that local businesses show their support so we can secure the event's future and the economic boost it brings with it for many years to come."

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