

TIMES ONLINE

Mush, my beauties – we're a long way from Jamaica

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The Yukon Quest dogsled race covers 1,000 miles of icy waste, so why is a son of the Caribbean who had never even seen snow until last year taking part?



Look deep into my eyes: one of the team of huskies



Devon Anderson with his huskies



Devon Anderson and friends



Devon Anderson practicing with buggy and dogs

They say the Yukon Quest is the toughest dogsledding race in the world. It runs each February between Whitehorse in Canada's Yukon Territory and Fairbanks, Alaska, across 1,000 miles of frozen wasteland.

For 10 days mushers survive alone and unaided with their dogs in blizzards and temperatures as low as -40C – surely no environment for a Jamaican.

But that's not how 44-year-old Devon Anderson sees it. Jamaica's number one (and the only) musher plans to leave the sweltering, palm-fringed beaches of home to compete in the Quest. He admits the first time he saw snow was last year, but he is confident that he and his dogs will be ready for the Yukon Quest by 2009.

He has already taken part in competitions, including Scotland's Aviemore race last year, in which he came 27th in his class out of a field of 40. Even so, he'll have to negotiate tortuous mountain ascents, wolves and moose in the forests, and he won't be allowed to accept outside help.

"Sometimes I think, 'Boy, being out there all by myself . . . with nobody around but the dogs. If something should happen . . .' I think about it and my heart skips a beat," he says.

Back in 1988 the Jamaican bobsleigh team hit fame when it travelled to the Winter Olympics in Calgary. They crashed and were placed last, but their courage and passion warmed hearts the world over, and their story was later immortalised in the film *Cool Runnings*.

Anderson's story began several years ago while working for a Jamaican tourist operation called Chukka Caribbean Adventures. His boss, Danny Melville, was away in Edmonton, Canada, looking for a dune buggy with which to entertain his clients. Instead he found a wheeled dogsled of the type used for husky-sled racing in Scotland. So Melville dispatched Anderson to Alan Stewart's kennels in the Scottish Highlands to find out more. Stewart, who runs a dogsled adventure centre, was impressed with Anderson, and said of him: "He was brilliant with the dogs, a real Dr Dolittle." And so one thing led to another.

At first the sled was intended as a novel conveyance for tourists, but it was hard to find the right dogs to pull it. "Ninety-five per cent of them are rescue dogs," Anderson explains, "just local Jamaican mutts that lie around in the yard and bark at night. They're very laid-back dogs."

But with perseverance he trained them to run in harness over the grass and gravel terrain. Most days the entire team of 18 dogs runs at once, hooked up to a buggy that takes two tourists, one behind the other, while the musher operates the rig from behind, occasionally spraying the dogs with water to keep them cool.

So what made Anderson trade in the perfect job for one that will tax him to the limit? "Well, if it's there, why not give it a shot?" he says, paraphrasing Edmund Hillary.

But it will take more than derring-do to ensure the Yukon expedition doesn't turn out to be an ill conceived disaster. Anderson is backed by Melville, the American singer Jimmy Buffett, who has a bar on Jamaica, and Chris Blackwell, the founder of Island Records. What they needed was a man with real experience of Arctic conditions and finding one on Jamaica was not going to be easy.

Enter Hans Gatt, a bona fide hard man of the north, who won the Quest three years running between 2002 and 2004. In July he agreed to join the Jamaican dogsled team as chief coach.

"He understood that we love dogs, we know what we're doing, and we're really serious," says Anderson. "He realised that we're people who love animals and we'll care for them. And I think that is what brought him on board."

This winter, Anderson will be spending two months at Gatt's kennels in Canada, gleaning every last survival tip from the master. He will also meet his new team of dogs. Rather than the chilled-out mongrels he has been training with at home, his new team will comprise proper huskies, hard,

experienced dogs who – if they sense a weakness in the musher – become entirely uncontrollable.

Anderson remains upbeat. “For me there’s nothing to be intimidated about. This is something I’ve never dreamt of doing in my life, and now I’m doing it. Whether I come in last or first, the fun comes from just being out there on the snow, where there’s nobody else but you and the dogs and nature.” The training camp won’t be Anderson’s first experience of winter in the far north. The Jamaicans were invited by the Yukon Quest organisers to follow this year’s race.

They flew to Whitehorse in February, cheered the competitors at the start line and followed the teams checkpoint by checkpoint to the Quest’s midway point at Dawson City, a town made famous by the Klondike gold rush. There, Anderson had the opportunity to see first-hand what seamless days and nights on the trail can do to a person’s appearance: competitors routinely stagger into town after five days on the ice and snow in a state of utter exhaustion, their hair matted and unkempt, their eyes red-rimmed and staring.

“That’s the thing I’m thinking about,” says Anderson, shuddering, “the sleepless nights. How am I going to feel? What state am I going to be in?”

During that trip, Anderson also had his first taste of winter camping. “That was something else,” he says. “I was thinking, ‘Oh, we’re going to find some cabin in the hills and we’ll stop and we’re going to have fun.’ But it was getting to afternoon and then all of a sudden the guide just stopped and said, ‘Devon, I think this is a good place to stop.’ And I thought, ‘Stop to do what?’

“He said, ‘I think we can camp here.’ And I’m like, ‘Oh my gosh. The ground is all covered in white. And there’s no hammock’.”