

Cool Runnings II: after bobsleigh, Jamaica tries its hand at dog-sled

By Paul Kelbie, Scotland Correspondent

Published: 21 January 2006

As he lines up in Europe's biggest dog-sled race today, Devon Anderson has more reason than most of his rivals to be nervous.

Not only does he have just seven months' experience of a sport usually associated with Siberia or Alaska - he has never seen snow. As the world's first Jamaican dog-sled racer, Anderson, who usually organises adventure holidays, is far more at ease with the climate of his Caribbean home than with the chill of Aviemore.

What's more, comparisons with Jamaica's bob-sleigh team - which came to prominence at the Calgary Olympics in 1988 and inspired the film *Cool Runnings* - are inevitable.

Looking at the snow on the top of the Cairngorms the novice "musher", 42, admits the pressure is on. "I want to be an inspiration for other young Jamaicans," he said. "There is a lot of talent in Jamaica and a lot of interest in what I am doing. If I can put up a good show I'm sure other guys will want to have a go."

Inspiration for a Jamaican dog sled team came from an entrepreneur, Danny Melville, who owns a travel company called Chukka Adventure Tours on the island. While he was in America looking to buy dune buggies for a resort he owns he had the idea of dogsled tours through the cane fields and sand dunes of Jamaica.

Mushers train their dogs all year round and, in the absence of snow, compete using a tricycle in place of a sled. Realising that the absence of snow was no bar Mr Melville imported the rigs and the know-how to run the tours - and set up a national team.

Under the guidance of a Scottish champion sledder, Alan Stewart, the first Caribbean dog-sled team was formed. It was sponsored by the

country music singer Jimmy Buffet, who also owns a chain of restaurants on the island.

Instead of importing pedigree huskies used to operating in temperatures of minus 40C and unlikely to cope with the heat, the team searched closer to home for their dogs. They found them roaming the streets of Kingston and now have nine strays in training.

"They're all mongrels, not a single pure breed among them. As Jimmy Buffet said, 'They look just like what a Jamaican sled dog should look like'," said Mr Melville.

With plans to take part in more international races, Mr Melville claims the team is taking the sport seriously and wants to encourage other Jamaicans to take it up. They have been accepted into the World Sled Dog Federation.

Mr Stewart, the coach, has no doubt the Jamaicans could do well and has tipped Anderson to finish in the top 15 this weekend. "I think Devon could do very well considering it is his first ever competition and he is up against some very fast boys who do this every weekend," he said. "He has a lot of pressure on him but he is very cool. He's a top polo player in Jamaica and very competitive, so I'm sure that will kick in as soon as he gets going with the dogs."

Fortunately for the Jamaicans, snow on the ground is unlikely this weekend at the Siberian Husky Club's Aviemore Sled Dog Rally. The biggest event of its kind in Europe, the two-day race runs over a four-mile course around Loch Morlich with teams of between two and eight dogs running at speeds of up to 20 miles an hour. Sets of huskies, malamutes, samoyeds and Eskimo dogs compete against the clock.

"When we started 23 years ago we had just eight teams competing but this year we have 222 teams with around 1,500 dogs," said Penny Evans, the organiser.

Almost every competitor has spent the past few weeks praying for snow as, along with three-wheelers, each team also has a traditional sled. However, in the history of the event, there has only been snow once.

"I'd have liked the chance to experience a sled on snow but I'm relieved there isn't any," said Mr Anderson. "The dogs are so powerful

I don't know how I would handle them." He has set his sights on the 2010 Winter Olympics.

As he lines up in Europe's biggest dog-sled race today, Devon Anderson has more reason than most of his rivals to be nervous.

Not only does he have just seven months' experience of a sport usually associated with Siberia or Alaska - he has never seen snow. As the world's first Jamaican dog-sled racer, Anderson, who usually organises adventure holidays, is far more at ease with the climate of his Caribbean home than with the chill of Aviemore.

What's more, comparisons with Jamaica's bob-sleigh team - which came to prominence at the Calgary Olympics in 1988 and inspired the film *Cool Runnings* - are inevitable.

Looking at the snow on the top of the Cairngorms the novice "musher", 42, admits the pressure is on. "I want to be an inspiration for other young Jamaicans," he said. "There is a lot of talent in Jamaica and a lot of interest in what I am doing. If I can put up a good show I'm sure other guys will want to have a go."

Inspiration for a Jamaican dog sled team came from an entrepreneur, Danny Melville, who owns a travel company called Chukka Adventure Tours on the island. While he was in America looking to buy dune buggies for a resort he owns he had the idea of dogsled tours through the cane fields and sand dunes of Jamaica.

Mushers train their dogs all year round and, in the absence of snow, compete using a tricycle in place of a sled. Realising that the absence of snow was no bar Mr Melville imported the rigs and the know-how to run the tours - and set up a national team.

Under the guidance of a Scottish champion sledder, Alan Stewart, the first Caribbean dog-sled team was formed. It was sponsored by the country music singer Jimmy Buffet, who also owns a chain of restaurants on the island.

Instead of importing pedigree huskies used to operating in temperatures of minus 40C and unlikely to cope with the heat, the team searched closer to home for their dogs. They found them roaming the streets of Kingston and now have nine strays in training.

"They're all mongrels, not a single pure breed among them. As Jimmy Buffet said, 'They look just like what a Jamaican sled dog should look like'," said Mr Melville.

With plans to take part in more international races, Mr Melville claims the team is taking the sport seriously and wants to encourage other Jamaicans to take it up. They have been accepted into the World Sled Dog Federation.

Mr Stewart, the coach, has no doubt the Jamaicans could do well and has tipped Anderson to finish in the top 15 this weekend. "I think Devon could do very well considering it is his first ever competition and he is up against some very fast boys who do this every weekend," he said. "He has a lot of pressure on him but he is very cool. He's a top polo player in Jamaica and very competitive, so I'm sure that will kick in as soon as he gets going with the dogs."

Fortunately for the Jamaicans, snow on the ground is unlikely this weekend at the Siberian Husky Club's Aviemore Sled Dog Rally. The biggest event of its kind in Europe, the two-day race runs over a four-mile course around Loch Morlich with teams of between two and eight dogs running at speeds of up to 20 miles an hour. Sets of huskies, malamutes, samoyeds and Eskimo dogs compete against the clock.

"When we started 23 years ago we had just eight teams competing but this year we have 222 teams with around 1,500 dogs," said Penny Evans, the organiser.

Almost every competitor has spent the past few weeks praying for snow as, along with three-wheelers, each team also has a traditional sled. However, in the history of the event, there has only been snow once.

"I'd have liked the chance to experience a sled on snow but I'm relieved there isn't any," said Mr Anderson. "The dogs are so powerful I don't know how I would handle them." He has set his sights on the 2010 Winter Olympics.