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Mushing the Jamaican way

Jamaica Dogsled Team musher sets sights on the Yukon Quest, among world's most demanding races

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Maybe it's the heat that makes them do it. A sun-kissed athlete from Jamaica is about to take the Great White North by storm again.

In a project reminiscent of the Jamaican bobsled team's participation in the 1988 Calgary Olympic Games, immortalized in the 1993 comedy *Cool Runnings*, the owner of the Jamaica Dogsled Team announced that his lead musher would be training with a former champion to take on one of the most demanding dogsled races in the world.

That's dogsled, not bobsled.

"Ninety per cent of the time I have to correct people, it's not bobsled, it's dogsled, they always mix it," explains head musher Devon Anderson in a phone interview from Jamaica.

Anderson will train with three-time race winner Hans Gatt for the 1,500-kilometre 2009 Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race that connects Fairbanks, Alaska to Whitehorse.

To get there he'll have to prepare for 300 and 450-kilometre qualifiers, starting this fall either in Canada or Alaska.

"It's in the making!" he said.

Relatively new to the sport, Anderson visited Canada last year to follow the Yukon Quest and even mushed on Lake Laberge. He'd seen snow before, but never this much.

"It blew me away: the people, the snow, the landscape, it was like living in a storybook," he said.

Anderson said he'll have to practise being around the dogs and spending extended periods of time in the cold to be ready to tackle the first qualifiers.

"We're not talking about winning, but competing, it's an endurance race," said team owner Danny Melville, a tour adventure company owner on the island nation. "This is not just a promotional move, we take mushing seriously and Gatt agrees; otherwise he would not be wasting his time with us."

What started like a tour company gimmick turned into serious competitive training quite unexpectedly.

In spring 2005, Melville was shopping for dune buggies in Edmonton when he spotted a crazy-looking dog sled and had an "epiphany" about starting a dogsled team.

Initially created from mixed breed dogs found on the street or through the Jamaican Society for Prevention of Cruelty of Animals, The Ocho Rios-based team is now big business with sponsors that include singer and songwriter Jimmy Buffett.

"We're talking about a Jamaican entering the Yukon Quest and hopefully completing it," Melville said. "That in itself is an achievement."

There'll be no need to wait for the movie, Palm Pictures' documentary feature Sun Dogs, chronicling the struggle to make contenders out of Jamaica-bred street dogs in time for the 2006 Dogsled Championships in Scotland, already premiered at Toronto's ReelWorld Film Festival in April.