

Commentary: Jamaican dogsled team no joke

Ian Walker, The Vancouver Sun
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VANCOUVER — Who'd have thought a summer visit to Canada would result in a winter athlete coming out of Jamaica?

“But it's true, mon.”

Who'd have thought music legend Jimmy Buffet was a fan of dogsledding?

“But it's true, mon.”

Who'd have thought a man who had never seen snow before last year would be the most popular man in Whitehorse?

“But it's true, mon.”

Danny Melville is on the phone from the headquarters of the Yukon Quest Dog Sled Race and his thick Jamaican accent has one immediately thinking surf, sand and sarongs.

Melville is the owner of Chukka Caribbean Adventures and the brains behind the first, and only, Jamaican dogsled team. He founded the team a couple of years ago during a June visit to Edmonton, where he saw a musher running a dog team on a wheeled sled over snowless terrain.

Two years later, his tours carry clients on rubber-wheeled carts over paths and meadows, avoiding the country's many beaches — since the sleds don't perform well on sand.

“Basically, it's something outrageous that we shouldn't be doing — it's a telling tale of the psyche of Jamaicans,” said Melville, who quickly secured the sponsorship of Buffett and record producer Chris Blackwell, of Bob Marley fame.

“But our intentions are admirable. We want to promote dogsledding as a sport and promote Jamaica, mon.”

Melville and musher Devon Anderson are on a fact-finding mission at the 1,000-mile Yukon Quest — arguably one of the toughest dogsled races in the world. Their adventure will follow the annual event to Dawson City, the halfway point along the race trail and home of the world-famous Klondike Gold Rush.

“It is so amazing to me — very cold but very beautiful,” said Anderson, who first raced in snow last week in St. Paul, Minn. He saw the white stuff fall for the first time in a race in Scotland last year.

“Racing on snow involves so much more balance.”

While winter sports aren't entirely foreign to steamy Jamaica — with the country's bobsled team getting widespread attention at the 1988 Calgary Olympics — Anderson said he still gets some funny looks when he's asked what he does.

“Sometimes they don't believe me or even though I said dogsled they automatically think bobsled,” he said. “I was at customs and the immigration guy asked what I was doing in the country and after I told him he laughed so hard and told me I want to know your boss — he's crazy. I could hear him laughing the whole way out of the airport.”

The 2007 Yukon Quest starts in Whitehorse on Saturday and ends in Fairbanks, Alaska, about two weeks later.

The race commemorates the historic Arctic Trail and the men, women and sled dogs who challenge the frozen rivers, four mountain ranges, remote isolation and extremes of nature that can see temperatures drop to -40 C and bring 100 mile-per-hour storms.

“Back 100 years ago you would have died in the Yukon without a sled of dogs,” said Stephen Reynolds, Yukon Quest executive director.

Defending champion Lance Mackey and past winners Hans Gatt, John Schandelmeier and Frank Turner highlight the field, which also includes Japanese rookie Yuka Honda and five other female entrants.

Still, don't think for a second Anderson won't be the centre of attention.

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