

These underdogs love to run

Jamaican dogsled team defies expectations

BY LAURA YUEN
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Jamaican dog musher Devon Anderson has taken in haggard street pups and turned them into sled dogs with surprising success.

However, there is one thing he had never done — mush a pack of dogs in a race on actual snow. He'll get his chance this weekend at the St. Paul Winter Carnival on Harriet Island. He already took a couple of spills in northern Minnesota earlier this week while practicing for the exhibition races.

The Jamaican Dogsled Team? Don't we mean "bobsled"?

That's what everyone asks, Anderson said. That initial puzzlement often leads to new fans, he said.

"I think it's the old idea, just as the bobsled was, 'How did Jamaica get involved?' " Anderson said. "It's nowhere near anything that Jamaica has ever thought of or done. It's just the uniqueness about it."

Of course, there's a little show business motive behind it, confessed Anderson's boss, Danny Melville, who founded the team a couple of years ago after he came across a wheeled cart in Edmonton, Canada.

When the manufacturer told Melville that mushers around the world have taken up dry-land sledding now that the snow has gotten less reliable, it was as if lightning struck. "We can do that. In Jamaica, we have so many dogs," Melville said.

"I saw it as a way to promote Jamaica, and, quite frankly, to promote our business," said Melville, who runs an outdoor tour company called Chukka Caribbean Adventures.

And he had just the right guy in mind: Anderson, Melville's operations manager who became known as the on-site "horse whisperer" after he was hired to run the stable for Chukka's farm 22 years ago.

Anderson and Melville decided to go not with the traditional husky, but with a crew of mutts, many of them from the local humane society that would have been euthanized if they didn't find a home. Island crooner Jimmy Buffett was amused by the underdog story and agreed to sponsor the team.

Under the tutelage of mushers Rick Johnson of Mahtowa, Minn., and Alan Stewart of Scotland, the Jamaican dogsled team has traveled to Minnesota for dry-land racing. The team finished second out of a field of 11 in a sled-dog race in Cannon Falls last October.

Melville also sought out the St. Paul Winter Carnival, given that residents in the Upper Midwest help fuel the tourism industry in the Caribbean.

"I think they bring a whole new audience to (the) carnival," said Kate Kelly, who heads the organization that produces the festival. "We've reached Parrotheads (as well as) the outstate market," referring to island fans and the sled-dog teams and their families. "They give us a new level of excitement."

The Jamaican team will be the subject of a new documentary called "Sun Dogs," which has not yet been released.

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IF YOU GO

The Jamaican dogsled team, along with several Minnesota teams, will participate in a rally from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. today and Sunday on Harriet Island in St. Paul.