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HOW JAMAICA DOG GO FASTER?

(You shout mush, of course)

By Samantha Booth

JAMAICA is famous for many things, including Bob Marley, sunshine and idyllic beaches. But it is safe to say that not many people would connect the paradise island of rum and reggae with sled-dog racing.

But now the small Caribbean nation is about to unveil its first ever sled-dog team and hopes are high that, despite being more used to blazing sunshine than freezing blizzards, Jamaican musher Devon Anderson and his dogs will still be able to make their mark on the World Championships in Belgium in December.

One day they, like the national bobsleigh team who were hailed as heroes when they became the first Jamaican team to make it to the winter Olympics, may be able to compete at the top level of one of the toughest winter sports around.

There are even whispers that just like the bobsleigh team, Devon's story could be made into a hit movie like *Cool Runnings* - but the fact of the matter is none of this would have been possible without Scots sled-dog racer and owner Alan Stewart.

The 49 year old from Aviemore has been Scottish champion four times, won all the UK events and raced all over the world, from the Alps to Argentina, winning the biggest race in South America, which lasts a gruelling two weeks.

He was also part of the first and only UK team to race in the extreme sled-dog event, The Alpen Trail, 400km over three sets of mountains and now he gives tourists and thrill seekers a taste of what it is to race sled-dogs like huskies and pointers at his remote Cairngorm Sled-dog Centre, the only place in the UK to offer such an experience.

But when Alan got a call from fourth generation Jamaican Scot Danny Melville, asking if he could take sled-dog racing to Jamaica, he didn't quite know what to think.

He said: 'Danny runs the biggest adventure tour business in the Caribbean but also has a house in Canada. While he was over there he went to an off-road buggy centre to buy some carts for a new operation he was setting up and came across one of my specialised sled carts being made.' He asked the man who was building it what it was because he'd noticed there was no engine in it.

'When the guy told him what it was all about Danny said he needed to talk to me and within a week had phoned me and asked if I could set up a competitive dog-sled team in Jamaica that would also work as a tourist attraction.

'I told him it takes years of experience to take tourists out but training a competitive team would just about be possible.'

In no time at all Danny had arranged for his would-be musher Devon to visit Alan in Aviemore to learn the basics of racing.

For 10 days last summer the Jamaican stayed with Alan and his wife Fiona in their cottage and spent hours each day learning how to work with his 29 huskies and German pointers.

Alan said: 'It became obvious pretty quickly why Danny had selected Devon to be a musher, he just has a way with animals.

'He loved being in the Cairngorms. He was walking with the herds of red deer and that is just incredible. I found out later that in Jamaica he is what could only be called a horse whisperer.

'When I was out there I went out with Devon to catch wild horse for Danny. We went up into Errol Flynn's wife's estate at the top of Jamaica and this guy told us where we would find the herds.

'Within half an hour Devon returned with about 15 horses in tow. Then he told the guide who was supposed to know all these horses well that four of the mares were pregnant but we shouldn't take them because they were too inbred.

'He's an utterly amazing man. In Jamaica they call him 'the doctor' because of his incredible skills.'

At the start of August this year Alan followed Devon back to Jamaica for six weeks of intensive sled dog training. The aim was to set up a kennel and sled-dog museum while also completing Devon's training.

Not surprisingly, sled-dog racing in the heat of Jamaica is a far cry from the chilly Cairngorm mountains.

ALAN said: 'Before I left I had no idea of what kind of dogs we were going to get so I couldn't even think about what kind of training we would be doing.

'It takes years to train sled-dogs but I knew we be able to go into a welfare home and spot the right dogs very quickly.

'And it was great to be able to save nine dogs because out there stray or abandoned dogs are only kept two days before they are put down, which is understandable because the people are so poor they don't understand why an animal should be kept in luxury when they have so little.

'One dog was a rottweiler called Bruno who had been a former guard dog and nobody could go near him except Devon's assistant Newton.

'Newton was only 18 and had never seen a sled-dog in his life but I harnessed Bruno up to a scooter and got him to follow Newton on a quad bike and away he went like a rocket. Hey presto! We had found our lead dog.'

Alan had thought the dogs would have a problem doing such physical work in the gruelling 40 degree heat so he had brought with him special cooling jackets that are normally used by the army in Iraq to keep their sniffer dogs cool.

However, because the rescued dogs were born and bred in Jamaica the heat was never a problem for them.

Amazingly, in just six weeks Alan had Devon and his team trained to a competitive level.

The Scot was even instrumental in bringing the World Sled Dog Federation from Minnesota in America to give their mark of approval to the set-up in Jamaica.

This is something that Britain has yet to achieve in 30 or 40 years of sled-dog racing, despite having around 3000 racing dogs in the country and countless unofficial races and championships.

And now Devon and his team have received their invite from the World Championship organisers in Belgium and with a little help from their sponsors, who include multi-millionaire country and western star Jimmy Buffet and record producer Chris Blackwell, they may also be going to South America to race next year.

Alan hopes both Devon and Danny will be able to come across to Scotland for some final preparation before the meet and maybe, if sled-dog racing becomes a winter Olympic sport - which is the hope of the Federation - then the Jamaican team might well be there alongside the likes of America and Canada at the 2010 event.

He said: 'Sled-dog racing really has become Danny's passion.

'What's brilliant is that the sled-dog racing world does not just have another team, it has a whole new country.

'With the backing of guys like Danny and the others who have supported Jamaica's efforts, who knows what they might achieve?'

