

A woman wearing a grey and blue winter jacket, a patterned knit hat, and black gloves is mushing a red sled. She is holding the black handlebars of the sled. Three dogs are pulling the sled: a white husky-like dog in the front, a brown and white husky-like dog to the right, and a smaller brown and white dog behind it. They are all running through a snowy field with trees in the background.

Mushing

By Catherine Benson
Photographs by Eric Benson

Now you can experience the thrill of riding down a beautiful tree-lined trail behind a team of well-trained sled dogs right here in Charm City.

But this is Maryland; what if there is no snow? One of the best-kept secrets of dogsledding is that mushing is not just a winter activity. With concerns about global warming shortening the season for dogsledding and for people living in temperate areas like Baltimore, there has been a recent emphasis on what is frequently called "dryland." Dryland is dogsledding using wheeled carts, bikes, scooters, or even your own two feet.

How did you, two people living in Maryland, get into dogsledding? After we adopted our first dog, Zoë, from the Dorchester County Humane Society, it became apparent that Zoë was an energetic pup with a penchant for eating couches. "After the second couch, we decided dog-powered sports might be a less expensive way of entertaining her," said Maryland Sled Dog Adventures (MSDA) chief poop scooper, Eric Benson.

The MSDA team
in fresh snow in
Western Maryland

in Maryland.

No Snow Necessary.

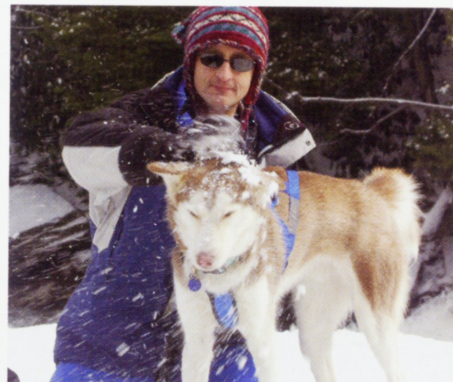
Dogsledding in Baltimore? Yep, you got that right, hon!



T-Bone



Zoë



Sobo's snow shower

Our second dog, T-Bone, is a petite and precocious five-year-old Siberian Husky-Sheltie mix. We adopted T-Bone from Tails of the Tundra Siberian Husky Rescue, Inc., as a companion for Zoë. As a young dog, T-Bone frequently refused to run and would jump back in the car. But with time, T-Bone's impatience kicked in and he grew tired of waiting in the car. One day, T-Bone decided to join Zoë on the trail and since that day nearly four years ago, he has not looked back.

Next, the team grew to include Sobo, a three-year-old Siberian Husky. "Sobo was a dog that we were fostering for rescue that we decided to keep since he was such a wonderful fit with our other dogs," said Eric Benson. Sobo loves howling his enjoyment at the start of runs.

Okemo rounds out the MSDA LLC team of sled pets. Okemo's big,

powerful build makes him a perfect wheel dog. Okemo both eats and pulls with great gusto.

Dryland dogsledding is not new and has always been used by mushers to condition and strengthen their dogs in the off-season. That way, by the time the snow arrives, the dogs and their musher have built up their strength and endurance. With recent warm winters, dryland dogsledding has become a popular sport in its own right with local, regional and international races attracting competitors from across the country and around the world. Here in Central Maryland, you'll find the Fair Hill Dryland Challenge. Novice or expert, all are welcome at these events and they are a great place to learn all about dog-powered sports.

Don't you need a lot of dogs to pull a dogsled? This is another myth about dog-



Okemo



Sobo

powered sports. Sure, if you want to run the Iditarod, you need a lot of dogs. But if your goals are more modest, one or two medium-sized or larger dogs will suffice.

Dogsledding is addictive, however, and one dog can quickly end up being three or four dogs, a new rig, a new sled, and a new vehicle to carry the new dogs and gear. Just ask Linda Powers of Berlin, Md., who started two years ago with one dog and a scooter and

is now up to three dogs, a sled and a new rig.

But how can so few dogs pull a grown person? A dog in good condition and good health, running in low temperatures can easily pull three times his own body weight at a moderate pace over distance. Applying this guideline, the MSDA team pulling power exceeds 600 pounds. Contrary to popular belief, dogsledding is not just about making the dogs pull you.

Dogsledding is a partnership based on trust and respect between the musher and the dogs. Frequently the musher must assist the dogs when they grow tired or when going up steep hills by “pedaling” (pushing) the sled or rig, or by running alongside or behind the sled or rig. “The care of a team, no matter how large or small, creates a special bond between the musher and his or her team. That bond is one of the many perks of the sport,” said Powers.

While you may not think of Fido as a canine athlete, when you ask him to work in harness, you are asking him to become an athlete. As with any athlete, you must train slowly and work up to longer and faster runs. There are several things to monitor closely while training, including hydration. Much like a human athlete needs to stay hydrated during exercise, hydration is critical to canine athletes as well. Mushers typically hydrate their dogs several times before, during and after a run. But beware, what goes in must also come out. While that may not be a problem out on the trail, it can be a big problem in the truck during the drive home.

One of the main challenges facing mushers in temperate areas like Baltimore is temperature. In dogsledding, mushers frequently use what is called the “Rule of 100.” Add the temperature and the humidity together. If the total is more than 100, it is likely too warm to run. In Maryland, this frequently dictates a pre-dawn arrival at the trail.

Can dogs other than northern breeds participate in dog-powered sports? At MSDA, we believe that all dogs should get out and try their



Team MSDA races at the Fair Hill
Dryland Challenge

hands (or paws) at dog-powered sports. But what if I only have one medium-sized dog? Some of the fastest and most resilient sled dogs used for dog sled racing, Alaskan Huskies, are actually medium-sized mixed breed dogs. Any dog over approximately 30 pounds and in otherwise good health can be taught to pull. At MSDA, we've trained dogs ranging in size from barely 30-pound Eskies to 120-pound Alaskan Malamutes.

But don't you need a lot of dogs to pull a dogsled? Another little-known fact about dog-powered sports is that there are many dog-powered sports that require only one or two dogs, including bikejoring, scootering, canicross, and skijoring. All of these sports are easily done with only one dog (even the family dog) and require only modest investments in equipment.

Bikejoring is biking while being pulled by your dog. It can be done with as few as one dog to as many as three dogs. Some like bikejoring because, when assisting the dog, pedaling the bike is relatively easy.

Scootering is similar to bikejoring with the primary difference being that a scooter is used in lieu of a bike. But don't try this with your kid's scooter. Scooters intended for dog-powered sports have much stronger brakes and some even boast full suspensions. Some people prefer scootering to bikejoring because scooters have a lower center of gravity and are easier to balance on.

Canicross literally means to move cross-country with a canine. It is cross-country running while your dog pulls you. It is not simply jogging with your dog. In canicross, the dog pulls, helping to move the runner down the trail and up hills. Canicross requires that your dog pull and know basic dogsledding commands.

Skijoring is cross-country skiing while being pulled by your dog. Originating in Scandinavia and literally meaning "ski driving" in Norwegian, skijoring allows dog and owner to exercise together

Mushing in Maryland



The dogs enjoy a dryland run at Morgan Run NEA in Carroll County



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while enjoying the outdoors. Skijoring requires the skier to be proficient at cross-country skiing. Especially important is a good understanding of how to slow down and stop on cross-country skis. Typically, skijoring is a shared experience between the dog and skier, with both the dog and skier working together to move down the trail. In icy conditions, however, skijoring can become more like water skiing behind a fast moving boat with a predilection for chasing down squirrels. While "embracing your inner speed demon" can be fun, we recommend waiting for good snow, keeping the number of dogs manageable (one dog), and avoiding icy trails. Provided you follow these recommendations, skijoring is an excellent way to enjoy the serene calm of the outdoors. "Another perk for me," said Powers, "is the thrill of running on trails where I might never venture and being able to enjoy the beauty of nature."

Want to try skijoring, bikejoring or canicross but not sure how to get started? Consider taking a lesson. Sometimes training your first dog is the biggest hurdle. Much of the training associated with dog-powered sports is counter intuitive to the training a dog has received up until that point; namely, to walk on a loose leash and at heel. Here, the training focuses on teaching the dog to run down the trail pulling, six to eight feet in front of his owner. If your dog does not naturally run down the trail, training your first dog can be like trying to push a wet noodle. If this is your situation, check out MSDA's Run What You Brung training program for some help training your dog to pull. Visit www.marylanddogsledding.com for more information.

"I waited over 35 years before I could pursue a great desire to participate in this sport," said Powers. "By the time I had the time, I was retired and nearing 60 years of age. To make matters worse, I lived on the eastern shore of Maryland where snow is highly unusual," she added. "Most people would say that I had missed my window of opportunity, but I didn't see it that way. My persistence paid off, and because mushers tend to be people who love to share their expertise and help others, I soon found myself living my dream. The wait was well worth it," she said.

Dogsledding is no longer a world away. You don't need to wait a minute longer to have fun dogsledding right here in Charm City. Experience it today. 🐾

The dogs are ready to go, are you?

Resources

For more information on Maryland Sled Dog Adventures LLC or to schedule a dogsledding experience:

www.marylanddogsledding.com

For a list of dryland races throughout the United States and Europe:

www.sleddogcentral.com

To learn more about the Pennsylvania Sled Dog Club and the Fair Hill Dryland Challenge 2007:

www.pennsleddogclub.com

For information on dog scootering:

www.dogscooter.com

Tails of the Tundra Siberian Husky Rescue, Inc.

www.siberescue.com

Harnessed to Hope Northern Breed Rescue

www.nbrescue.com

Dorchester County Humane Society

www.dorchesterhumane.org

Zoë leads while Sobo and T-Bone follow

