

Maryland Sled Dog ADVENTURES

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101

HEALTH:
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the Inside Out



Dog Sledding *in Maryland*

By **Karyn Spellman**
Photography By **Dr. Eric Benson**



Eric Benson with the sled dog team.



Okemo taking a ride.



Mushing on the trail.



Taking a break for some TLC.

The air has turned cool, and the leaves have turned colors, which means it's the perfect time of year for dog sledding in northern Baltimore County.

Not one snowflake needs to fall for Catherine and Eric Benson to hook up their team of Siberian Huskies and husky mixes and take to the trails with the region's only dog-sled touring business.

The Bensons specialize in what's known as dryland dog sledding, which is perfect for a temperate area like central Maryland, and uses wheeled carts, bikes, or scooters. Of course they do run on snow when it does come, and that's when the dogs are hooked up to a traditional wooden sled.

The couple started Maryland Sled Dog Adventures, LLC in 2007, a few years after a hobby for a high-energy rescue dog turned into a passion for the sport of dog sledding.

"We wanted to share our love of dog sledding with the public," Catherine says.

Catherine says she and Eric adopted Zoë, a husky mix, and quickly discovered that their new family member needed more than just walks. After researching what could be an appropriate outlet for their energetic pup, the couple decided they would all train together for dog sledding.

"We got a very lightweight cart that she could pull by herself," Catherine says. "We were training her from the ground up."

Neither Catherine nor Eric had any experience with dog sledding, but Catherine says mushers, though "scattered geographically," have a tremendous amount of resources online and are extremely supportive of each other.

They then adopted T-Bone as a companion for Zoë, who didn't quite take to the training at first, but eventually caught on. They were supposed to foster their next dog, a Siberian Husky rescue named Sobo, but decided to keep

him after he got along so well with their other dogs.

And the Benson's love for their dogs and dog sledding – and what Catherine calls their "micromushing kennel" – grew. They now have eight dogs living with them at their home in Baltimore. The couple also now has two "mini-mushers," 2 1/2-year-old Ethan and 8-month-old Eloise.

Catherine, a former commercial litigator, now focuses on running the business. The official season is middle of October through end of March, and the 2013-2014 dates have already been booked. The season is restricted to cooler months because it's otherwise too warm for the dogs to run.

The most popular outings are the Girl Scout and Boy Scout patch programs, birthday party rides, individual rides, and tours. One portion of the Scout Patch program is tailored to re-enact the "Great Alaskan Serum Run" that



TOP PHOTO: The Patch Girl Scout program in Monkton, MD.

BOTTOM PHOTO: T-Bone during a recent classroom program at a private school in the Baltimore area.



took place in 1925 in Alaska to deliver medicine and made the sled dog Balto famous.

These programs take place at the Torrey C. Brown Trail, formerly the Northern Central Railroad Trail, in Baltimore County and last three to four hours. Catherine says they take the time with each program to ensure that participants, who are mostly children, get a full picture of the sport of dog-sledding.

"We have a hefty component of education," Catherine says. "We are not people who just throw people on a sled for a basic ride."

The Scouts learn how to harness the dogs, basic commands, how to use the gear, and all about the dogs. Then each participant gets a turn to ride on the cart or sled. Either Catherine or Eric drives the "rig" for safety reasons, taking each rider one at a time on about a half-mile run.

Maryland Sled Dog Adventures, LLC also offers other programs that cater to novice mushers looking for longer tours or an experience other than riding a cart or sled.



Catherine Canicrossing in Harford County, MD.



Catherine Skijoring



Eric going uphill with the whole team.

Canicross is cross country running, walking or hiking while your dog pulls you. It's more than just jogging with your dog. It requires that your dog understand basic commands, line out, and pull. Canicross can be done throughout the year, a great activity in the spring and fall months.

Skijoring is cross country skiing while a dog pulls you. It is an exhilarating and fast growing winter sport which combines cross country skiing and dog mushing. Originating in Scandinavia and literally meaning "ski-driving" in Norwegian, skijoring allows a dog and owner to exercise together while enjoying the outdoors.

Bikejoring is biking while being pulled by a dog. Bikejoring can be done with one to three dogs and is a shared adventure between you and your dogs. Bikejoring allows you to go further (and faster) than you might otherwise go by yourself.

Dog scootering is scootering while one to three dogs pull you while you ride on a non-motorized scooter. Dog scootering is similar to mushing and dog sledding, but can be done without snow and with fewer, one to three, dogs. To dog scooter, your dog must learn basic dog sledding commands including: gee, haw, line out, hike, and on by.

There's also the "Run What You Brung," program which lets beginning mushers bring their own high-energy dogs and get started with learning the basics of dog sledding. The dogs and owners are trained and given the opportunity to see all that's involved in dog-powered sports.

For enthusiasts who want to experience a dog-sledding adventure on snow, the Bensons offer a four-day trip to their cabin in western Maine in February. The long weekend is designed to teach and encourage participants how to drive

their own dog sleds, skijor, cross-country ski, and snowshoe.

The Bensons also still keep their own personal dog-sledding interests going as well. Eric, an associate professor at the University of Delaware, is currently training with their dogs for the Can-Am Crown Sled Dog Races in Fort Kent, Maine, in 2014.

Catherine and Eric's "mini-mushers," Ethan and Eloise, aren't quite up to the challenge yet of helping to train their sled pets, but Ethan is well on his way, Catherine says. "It's amazing how much he knows. He knows the dogs' names, and he helps with the equipment," Catherine says. He's not old enough to run a rig himself yet, but "he likes to be a passenger," she says. 🐾

KARYN ASH, is a freelance writer and editor based in Reisterstown, MD., and a longtime owner of chocolate Labs, including the newest addition to her family, Brady. She worked as a reporter and editor for the Associated Press in Baltimore and Atlanta, and for The Washington Times before taking a few years off to be a stay-at-home mom to her three children.

One of the challenges in dog sledding is keeping your team hydrated. The dogs exert themselves very hard as they run. To keep them hydrated, we have to bait their water with a little food.



For additional information on Maryland Sled Dog Adventures, LLC or to sign up for the waiting list visit:
www.marylanddogsledding.com.