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The Benson's established a dog sledding organization in Maryland.

Couple brings Alaskan sport to Delaware

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Most weekends Catherine Benson mushes through the Northern Central Rail Trail with her dog sled team.

Maryland Sled Dog Adventures, a dry-land dog sledding organization in central Maryland, first started with Catherine Benson, her husband, Eric Benson, and their dog, Zoe.

Eric said it is best to book dates three to four months in advance.

"We are booked every weekend and during the week," Eric said.

Catherine is the primary operator of Maryland Sled Dog Adventures. She is the musher, the trainer, guide and teacher, but she is also a lawyer. Before she found Zoe, an Alaskan Husky, Catherine said she practiced law for seven years and occasionally still does when she is not out running or teaching with the dogs.

Eric, a bio-resources professor at the university, said he routinely makes, customizes or sporadically breaks equipment for the team.

"The equipment is a bit like Harley-Davidson motorcycles - no one's set up is exactly the same and everyone has to customize their own," he stated on the organization's Web site.

Eric said before they found dog sledding, Zoe was a destructive dog with too much energy.

"She destroyed cell phones, bills, a pair of clogs and a couple couches," he said.

Eric said Zoe is a natural leader and is the predominant dog on the team.

"Your lead dogs are the most experienced, most responsive dogs," Eric said. "I'm looking for a dog that's smart, responsive. That kind of nervous energy I can use."

Catherine said all of her dogs came from rescue operations. Zoe was adopted from the Humane Society of Dorchester. When Catherine and Eric first began training Zoe she "really took to it," but their second dog, T-Bone, did not.

T-Bone is a Siberian Husky-Sheltie mix and is smaller than the other members of the team. Unlike Zoe's

boundless energy, T-Bone was, at first, much fonder of nestling on the Benson's couch than pulling a sled, Catherine said.

With the introduction of Sobo to the team, T-Bone became more interested. Sobo was originally being fostered by the Benson's for Tails of the Tundra Siberian Husky Rescue. Eric said they decided to make him a permanent member of the team after seeing his positive effect on the other dogs.

"Sobo is such a good fit with the other dogs," Eric said.

Catherine said their newest and youngest dog, Okemo, came from a rescue operation in Tennessee and in his first year with the team has proven to be a powerful "wheel dog"- the dog closest to the sled or rig that helps to steer the others.

She said she runs a patch program for local Girl Scout and Boy Scout troops known as the "Scout Run," which is a re-enactment of the famous Serum Run of 1925 to Nome, AK. An outbreak of diphtheria would have killed thousands of people that were stuck in Nome if medicine did not reach them in time.

It is a three to four hour program that gives approximately eight to 20 scouts a hands-on learning experience with the dogs, Catherine said. The scouts learn how to train the dogs, to harness them and then they setup a mock Serum Run relay.

She said she mashes with a scout to one location, where one scout gets out of the rig and gives the "serum" to another as he or she gets in and they race to the finish.

Catherine said she also leads a classroom program that gives young students the opportunity to have a tangible learning experience in conjunction with their teacher's lessons. She said the program is best with Jack London's "Call of the Wild," in which the students can interact with a real dog sled team and learn firsthand what London is describing.

Despite the lack of snow in Maryland there are a number of dry-land, dog-powered sports, Benson.

"As global warming warms our planet, there are less opportunities to run your dogs on snow," she said.

With this in mind, Catherine said she has a program called "Run What you Brung," which is designed to train dogs for various dog-powered sports.

One of these sports is bikejoring in which when a dog is harnessed to a bicycle and the dog pulls as the rider pedals. She said only a single dog should be used for this or it would be too powerful.

Canicross is cross-country running or walking with the dog pulling, Benson said. These dogs don't have to be the traditional Husky, but they do need to be at least a medium-sized dog, she said.

The overall goal of these sports is not to be pulled around but rather as an exercise for owners to spend time with their pets, she said.

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