

Mushing through Maryland

Snow or no snow, sled-dog teams are raring to take intrepid riders on a breathtaking outdoor adventure

By Stephanie Shapiro | sun reporter







February 9, 2008

On a bracing morning in early winter, 12-year-old Miranda Gindling is about to speed along the Northern Central Railroad Trail in Monkton, pulled by a team of four eager huskies. Not a snowflake's in sight.

"Do you get motion sickness?" Catherine Benson asks. The co-founder of Maryland Sled Dog Adventures has finished harnessing the team into a wheeled conveyance called a rig.

Miranda, a seventh-grade student at Sandy Spring Friends School who is working on a dog-sledding research project, shakes her head. Yet, she appears just a bit wary about this new adventure. Wearing a bike helmet and belted into the rig's seat, though, she's ready to mush.

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So are Zoe, Okemo, Sobo and T-Bone, straining at their lines, yowling and baying in anticipation. Benson steps onto the rig behind Miranda and grabs the handlebar from which she'll command the huskies and work the brake.

The team bursts from its restless repose and makes for the trail's wide, gravel path.

Who needs snow?

When Benson acquired Zoe from a rescue organization, she had no idea the Alaskan husky would lead to a new obsession and occupation.

Zoe, Benson soon discovered, needed an outlet. "Her job was eating couches and destroying stuff," she says. The Roland Park resident, then a practicing attorney, bought a lightweight wheeled rig for dryland dog sledding. While mastering dogsledding basics, she also trained Zoe, whom she realized had an admirable work ethic.

Then, along came T-Bone to keep company with Zoe. A small Siberian husky-Sheltie mix, T-Bone at first refused to run. He "would not be everyone's first choice," Benson says. Eventually, he grew bored of balking and decided to join Zoe on

the trail.

Both Sobo and Okemo, also rescued huskies, were adopted with mushing in mind, although Benson likens Sobo, a purebred Siberian husky, to a "high school athlete who doesn't always put it together."

Through research, practice and frequent consultations with the flourishing mushing community beyond Baltimore, Catherine and her husband, Eric, turned their underachievers into a responsive little team. Catherine Benson came into her own as a dogsledder as well - and left lawyering behind.

The Bensons established Maryland Sled Dog Adventures, their own "micromushing kennel." Soon, they and their team were participating in regional contests, including the

annual Fair Hill Dryland Challenge in Cecil County and dryland races in Pennsylvania, Virginia and elsewhere.

Maryland Sled Dog Adventures is the only dog-sledding operation in central Maryland, and one of two in the state. In Western Maryland, Husky Power Dogsledding, run by Linda and Mike Herdering, features tours and lessons, with or without snow.

With a team of 10 to 12 dogs, Husky Power's 250-pound rig can pull two passengers and a musher, "maybe 1,000 pounds or more," Linda Herdering says.

Dryland sledding has its advantages, Herdering says. On a wheeled sled, passengers are seated higher than they would be on a snow sled, and so instead of a view of "little dog butts," they can "watch the team work," Herdering says.

Based in Newark, Del., Howling Huskies Sled Dog Adventures offers programs for Scouts, youth groups and home-schooled kids at Fair Hill Natural Resource Management Area in Elkton.

Popular 30 years ago, dryland racing events have "re-emerged in the last few years because of the impact of global warming and the lack of snow," says Dave Steele, executive director of the International Sled Dog Racing Association. Outside the racing world, "There is a whole new community of dog people out there" who have embraced canine-powered, dryland sports, Steele says.

Snow, of course, is the optimal weather condition for most dogsled enthusiasts. It stills the clatter of gear, slows the sledding and trims the landscape with a glittery coat of white. Benson and her husband, an assistant professor at the University of Delaware, take their team of dogs to Western Maryland, Canada and upstate New York for long, happy runs in deep snow cover.

Snow or no snow, Maryland Sled Dog Adventures operates from September through May, when it becomes too warm to run. The Bensons must constantly retrain the dogs to get them "back into condition" come the cooler weather.

On weekends, the Bensons are often on the NCR Trail with their team, working with Scout troops, small parties and individuals. They offer dog-sled tours, classroom presentations and birthday-party rides. One program allows participants to simulate the 1925 "serum run" that delivered diphtheria medication to Nome, Alaska, and made an international celebrity out of lead dog Balto.

Through their "Run What You Brung" program, the Bensons invite participants to hitch up their own dogs if the animals are healthy and large enough (30 pounds and up) to pull a sled.

The dog-sledding outfit offers lessons in canicross, the sport of running, walking or hiking while being pulled by a dog, as well as bikejoring, a mashup of bike wheels and whiskers. When there's a good layer of snow on the ground, the Bensons also teach skijoring, a canine-propelled form of cross-country skiing.

Before Miranda's ride, Catherine Benson talks safety, harnessing and commands.

"Don't ever let go," otherwise you may "get injured or killed," she advises her student as Miranda plays with Zoe's silky ears.

Benson delivers her usual talk on mushing gear and how to respond if there is a four-dog pile-up and the line that holds the huskies together gets tangled.

"Line out" directs the team to stand in taut formation to keep the gang line straight and untangled. The command "gee" directs a team to bear right, and "haw" takes them to the left.

Because of the NCR's width and dearth of obstacles, "there are not a lot of 'gees' or 'haws' on this trail," Catherine Benson says. Still, it's best to stick to the right to allow for the flow of bikers, joggers and other trail traffic, she says.

Nearly two miles down the trail, Benson will trade places with Miranda and let her drive for a short distance. About 30 minutes later, the team trots back to its starting point. Eric Benson has followed the team on a bicycle and snaps photos of Miranda's moment in command. "I've got the pictures to prove it," he says.

It was a brief but exhilarating outing. The huskies are now becalmed, satisfied with their two-mile run, and Miranda wears a wide smile.

She did well, Catherine Benson says. "She drove and held on and did not fall off."

Using a GPS, Benson logged the team's speed. At their fastest, the dogs ran at a 12-mile-per-hour clip. The average speed was 8.7 miles per hour.

Her sprint was "really cool," Miranda says. The dogs "knew exactly what they were doing."

Dog-sledding lesson



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Catherine Benson instructs Miranda Gindling about dog sledding before they make a run along the NCR Trail at Monkton Station. (Sun photo by Christopher T. Assaf / December 27, 2007)

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Eric Benson straps Miranda Gindling into the sled as she waits to ride with Catherine Benson during her lesson. (Sun photo by Christopher T. Assaf / December 27, 2007)

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Catherine and Eric Benson of Maryland Sled Dog Adventures get their dogs ready for a run on the Northern Central Railroad Trail. (Sun photo by Christopher T. Assaf / December 27, 2007)

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Zoe, an Alaskan Husky, gets some attention from Miranda Gindling. (Sun photo by Christopher T. Assaf / December 27, 2007)

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Catherine Benson commands the huskies and works the brake as she sleds with Miranda Gindling. (Sun photo by Christopher T. Assaf / December 27, 2007)

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Miranda Gindling, 12, enjoys a canine-powered ride on the Northern Central Railroad Trail. Catherine Benson (rear) commands the four dogs: Zoe, Sobo, Okemo and T-Bone. (Sun photo by Christopher T. Assaf / December 27, 2007)

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