

STORYCHAT: [Read Comments](#)

The huskies flew past me in a blur of fur, paws, ears and 16 legs, towing behind them a man on a three-wheeled cart. They took off on the dirt trail, flying over the grassy hills toward the line of bare trees in the distance.

I wasn't in Alaska, and there wasn't even snow on the ground. I was in Fair Hill, Md., and I was watching sled dogs at work.

Calling it work for the sled dogs doesn't seem quite right. As Chris Bannister unloaded his Siberian Huskies from his van and temporarily hooked them up to an attached line to stand while he got organized, you could see in their clear, blue eyes how excited they were. The dogs jumped and barked, excited for the run that was ahead.

Ozark, Storm, Mist and Alaska didn't appear to mind the cold or the chilly wind as owner and trainer Chris Bannister untangled all of the harnesses and attached a line to his rig.

The training rig has three wheels, one in the front, two on the sides and is about a foot above ground level. The rig weighs about 125 pounds, which is why Chris, weighing in at 225, only uses it for training. His racing rig is made of super-strong lightweight framing -- the same kind used to make mountain bikes -- and only weighs 42 pounds. According to Chris, each dog can pull between 300 and 400 pounds, ranking them stronger than horses, pound for pound.

Neither rig has seen much use during the off-season though, since the dogs can only run and race when it's cold outside. The season starts when the temperatures dip down into the 40s during the day, and ends when it starts to get warm again. When there's an accumulation of snow, Chris will use a sled. But for most of the season, at least in these parts, he rides the three-wheeled rig.

As soon as the harnesses came out, the dogs went crazy, barking and wiggling their furry bodies in excitement. They quieted as Chris slipped on their harnesses. Alaska is the young female learning to lead the team, and the moment Chris had her hooked to the rig and told her to stay, she was all business.

Each of the dogs on the team have their own distinct personality. Ozark is the loner, but Chris said he's the best runner of the bunch and is a great leader. Alaska is Ozark's sister, and is "still a little goofy," but learning to lead. Mist is quiet and shy, and the smallest of the four, but she lights up once she is harnessed and ready to go. Storm is the oldest of the group at five, and stands calmly while the rest of the group hops and barks.

Chris is originally from Minnesota. That's where he first met Storm, when he was just a puppy, with the idea that he might get into sled dog racing one day, though he didn't really get into the sport until after moving to the east coast.

The pack has since grown, and now Chris and his wife Jessica, (who got into the training and racing when she started dating Chris four years ago) have seven Siberian Huskies. Isis, Tundra and Rayne are trained to pull the sled, but don't have the speed of the other four, so they don't make the race team.

Chris takes his dogs on training runs several times a week, and the dogs run a total of between six and 10 miles a week.

Once the dogs are in shape, they can reach speeds of up to 27 miles per hour, pulling Chris on his rig behind them. They can go even faster without Chris on the rig, something he well knows from the occasions when he's fallen off. It's an often-repeated joke among mushers that you're not a real musher until you've fallen off and lost your team.

Most of the courses that Chris races are 3.5 miles long, about the length of a 5K run. Like people, there are dogs that are sprinters and dogs that are distance runners. Chris' are more sprinters. He'd love to run the 1,150 mile Iditarod one day, but he'd probably have to leave Alaska, Storm, Mist and Ozark at home and lease a team to do that.

But Chris' dogs love to race, and they'll get their first big test of the season this weekend, at the Fair Hill Challenge Race. Last year, they took first place in the four dog purebred division.

Wanna yell mush? Here's how to get involved

You don't need a purebred Siberian Husky to be a musher. Do you have a rambunctious Lab, or a big dog with excess energy? . They can mush.

Catherine Benson got into dog sledding about seven years ago, after adopting a high-energy working dog that needed a job to do. She now runs Maryland Sled Dog Adventures, and offers classes where people can bring their dogs, and learn how to properly train them to be a sled dog.

The first class to take is called Run What You Brung, and it is a two-hour class that focuses on teaching the owner how to properly train their dog, so they can take their dogs home and continue the training. The class takes two hours and costs \$100.

If your dog takes to it, but you know you're not going to get enough dogs to field a sled dog team, you can take the bike-jor class that

Catherine offers. It's the same kind of training, but you'll learn how to get your dog to pull a bike instead of a sled. If biking isn't your thing, canicross might be right for you. Canicross is where your dog pulls you on a run, and classes cost \$100 for a two-hour lesson.

If you're dog-less, or would like to get the enjoyment of a dogsled ride without all the work, Catherine also offers just rides.

The Yappy Hour Tours are short rides along the Northern Central Railroad Trail in northern Baltimore County, about an hour and a half south of Newark. The Yappy Hour Tours are \$75 per person, and include the option to help harness the dogs and learn about dogsledding, then a 30-minute ride.

Dog Sled tours are \$200, and are an extended version of the Yappy Hour Tours. You'll get to harness and learn about the dogs, then you get to ride for about an hour and half. And, if you really want to, they'll let you drive the rig.

If you're still looking to get involved a little closer to home, check out the Pennsylvania Sled Dog Club table at the Fair Hill Challenge. They'll have plenty of information about the sport, and may be able to hook you up with a local musher who would be willing to help a rookie.

GET INVOLVED CONTACTS

Maryland Sled Dog Adventures

www.marylanddogsledding.com

catherine@marylanddogsledding.com

Pennsylvania Dog Sled Club

www.pennsleddogclub.com

Watch live sled dog racing at the Fair Hill Challenge this weekend

Get a taste of sled dog racing this weekend, at the Fair Hill Challenge. There are professionally sanctioned races for teams of four and six dogs, each with a winner-take-all prize of \$500. Then there are races for four- and six-dog purebred teams, one- and two-dogs pulling scooters, one- and two-dog teams pulling bikes called bike-jor, canicross (which is cross-country running while attached to a dog) and additional four- and six-dog sled races.

All events are included in the weekend, since they're each considered integral parts of dogsledding. Many mushers start by training their dogs, one at a time, with canicross. Once they've mastered that, they move on to scooters and bikes, and finally, rigs.

Not everyone who is interested in mushing can put together a team as big as Chris', so the other events let them compete as well.

There are some things you should know if you plan on going to see the race. It is colder in Fair Hill than it is at your house. Trust me. You'll want to dress warmly, pack a thermos of hot chocolate and remember your gloves.

To get to the race from the north, you'll take 273 into Maryland, then make a right onto Appleton Road. There is a parking lot about one mile down on the right. This is where to park, and is also the best spot to view the race. The start/finish line is in this area, so you'll get to see the dogs take off, and the finish.

The race is a big loop, so watching it is like watching a cross-country running race. You'll be able to walk to other spots of the course to see bits and pieces of the race, but the start/finish line is the most exciting, and best spot to see it.

RACE INFO

Fair Hill Challenge

Fair Hill Natural Resource Area

Admission:

\$4 to park, and the SPCA is running a pet food drive, and are asking spectators to bring unopened cans or bags of dog food.

Schedule for Saturday, Dec. 6 and Sunday, Dec. 7:

9 a.m. -- Canicross

10 a.m. -- Scooter

11 a.m. -- Bike-jor

1 p.m. -- Six dog teams

3 p.m. -- Four dog teams

More info: www.pennsleddogclub.com

STORYCHAT 

 [Post a Comment](#)

This article does not have any comments associated with it

Copyright ©2008, The News Journal. Users of this site agree to the [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy/Your California Privacy Rights](#) (Terms updated March 2007). [Questions?](#)