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Fairfax girl travels to Maine for dog-sled class

By — Kitson Jazyuka, Published:
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“Hike-hike!”

Madeline Krisko’s words send puffs of vapor into the frigid air. The Siberian huskies in front of her whine and bark. Madeline releases the brake, and the dogs lunge against their harnesses, excited to work. The lines tighten as the dogs pull the wooden sled. They settle into a paw-pounding rhythm, whooshing down a quiet, snowy path.

A sixth-grader at Stenwood Elementary School in Fairfax, Madeline traveled to Maine in February to learn all about dog sledding. She got the idea after friends told her how much fun they’d had sledding in Alaska.

“My favorite dogs are huskies,” she said. “And when I heard my friends’ stories, I knew I wanted to try dog sledding.”

Madeline’s mom searched online and found Maryland Sled Dog Adventures, a small “mushing” kennel and dog sled operation in Baltimore County. Owner Catherine Benson takes groups on snowy outdoor dog adventures, including trips north to remote Starks, Maine, where the company has a log cabin in the woods with lots of trails.

When it was time to leave for their four-day trip, Madeline and her mom were nearly snowed in at home in Virginia.

“My dad shoveled snow that was 17 inches deep in the driveway so we could get out,” Madeline said. She and her mom had to take a train after their flight was canceled because of the wintry weather.

Driver’s ed

In Maine, even deeper snow covered the ground, and then it snowed some more — perfect weather for dog sledding. Before heading out to mush in super-chilly temperatures, Madeline and her mom bundled up in layer after layer. They stuffed hand warmers in their gloves and toe warmers in their socks, and put on hats, boots and coats.

On Day One, Madeline learned to steer with such voice commands as “Hike-hike!” (let’s go), “Gee!” (turn

right), “Haw!” (turn left), “Whoa!” (stop) and “On by!” (keep going).

“I was surprised that we didn’t say ‘mush’ like they do in the movies,” Madeline said.

In her first lessons, an instructor — instead of dogs — pulled the sled.

“At one point he raced forward, and I did a back flop into the snow,” Madeline said.

Soon she got the hang of it, handling a two-dog team, then a six-dog team with help from an instructor whose sled was hooked behind hers. For her solo, she drove four miles with a four-dog team (Beaver, Vale, Lumos and Acadia) along the snowy trails.

“When you’re all alone with the dogs, you just hear the wind,” Madeline said. “It was really cool moving super-fast, seeing the trees and the mountains while you’re gliding — more like shooting — across the snow.”

The dogs

Siberian huskies are hardworking dogs with super-thick white fur, often with black or reddish markings. In Maine, Madeline helped take care of the nine dogs, feeding them and making sure they had water. In the evenings, she cuddled up on the couch in the toasty warm cabin with Sobo, a husky with one blue eye and one that’s amber-colored.

“Each one had a different personality,” she said of the dogs. Acadia, for example, “was the sweet, gentle, cautious one in the group.” And blue-eyed Sammi “was full of energy, whining and making noise all the time.”

Back home in Virginia, Madeline was already dreaming up her next mushing adventure.

“I love the feeling like flying over the snow,” she said. “It’s not something you get tired of.”

Learn more about mushing

The word “mush” comes from the French word “marché,” which means “walk” or “run.” “We are called ‘mushers,’” says Catherine Benson, owner of Maryland Sled Dog Adventures.

To learn more about mushing, check out the company’s Web site at www.marylanddogsledding.com. Always ask a parent before going online.

Iditarod

Have you heard of the [Iditarod](http://www.iditarod.com)? The famous dog-sledding competition has been called the “last great race on Earth.” The 42nd Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race (it’s about 1,000 miles long) kicked off March 2 in Alaska and will stretch out over beautiful, rough terrain including jagged mountains, frozen rivers and tundra. Mushers and their dog teams weather temperatures far below zero and long hours of darkness to reach the finish, usually after about nine to 17 days. Find out more about the race and check out who’s winning at www.iditarod.com.

Maryland’s Jen Reiter is the official “Teacher on the Trail.” She will be traveling the Iditarod Trail during the race in a small plane and reporting her experiences for students and fellow teachers. Find her blog posts at www.itteacheronthetrail.com. Always ask a parent before going online.

— **Kitson Jazyuka**



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