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US

Urban Mushing Calls to Dogs' Wild Side



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COSTA MESA, Calif. -

Thousands of miles from the Alaskan wilderness, two huskies charge down a dusty path with their master in tow, shouting commands as foreign as snowflakes in this sunbaked part of the world.

There's no sled under the feet of Rancy Reyes, but he glides with ease as his hounds work up a lather pulling his two-wheeled scooter on winding dirt trails in a park.

(AP Photo/Reed Saxon)

Rancy Reyes, front, and his dogs Niko, left, and Lyka join a group of "urban mushers" hitting the trails in Fairview Park in Costa Mesa, Calif., Saturday, June 2, 2007. It's an effort to recreate the cold-weather sport where teams of huskies pull their owners on sleds through snow. But in sunny Southern California it's modified scooters, carts and sulkies on wheels that get pulled over dirt trails.

In a city better known for its high-end indoor mall than high-energy outdoor activities, "urban mushing" has taken hold and people are coming from more than two hours away to participate.

"I know plenty of Californians and nothing surprises me anymore," said Greg Sellentin, publisher of Alaska-based Mushing, the magazine of dog-powered adventure.

Much has been altered in its warm weather translation, but urban mushing - or dog scootering - offers a call to the wild for canines, in contrast to an explosion of dog bakeries, day care centers and strollers that increasingly pamper pups.

"They're basically in the den waiting to go hunt. They want to start running and hunting," said urban musher Rob Fuechtenicht. "When you hook them to the scooter, you're riding behind them and they're in this doggy nirvana kind of stage."

Members of Dogs Across America, a national scootering group launched in 2005, say their membership rolls have shot up particularly in Texas, Washington and California.

A recent outing of the Southern California Working Snow Dogs included huskies, malamutes, dobermans and a dalmatian - many of which had never put paw to snow. Other scootering groups boast photos of more unexpected breeds, including standard poodles.

The Southern California group, which started in 2005, has about 240 members, about 50 of whom show up most weekends to traverse Fairview Park in Costa Mesa, about 40 miles southeast of Los Angeles.

Yelping, restless dogs strapped into harnesses and leashes are tethered to a non-motorized scooter just below the handlebars. The owner stands on a platform often in shorts and a T-shirt - no need to bundle up.

The scooters, which cost \$200 to \$700, are equipped with brakes and knobby tires that ride over the trail's rocks and potholes more like a mountain bike than a sled over snow.

Many people ride Diggle Scooters, a company that fell into the urban mushing business by accident.

Fuechtenicht, the owner, said he started getting calls in 2003 from people asking about hooking their dogs up to his scooters.

"I thought these people were crazy," he said. "It was the furthest thing from my mind. Who would've thought?"

Fuechtenicht has created several models of dog scooters. Last year he sold about 250 and said this year's sales appear to be climbing closer to 600.

For the dogs' owners, scootering is a chance to bond with their pets and tap into the spirit of America's final frontier on urban trails in the Lower 48. For some of the dogs, however, getting in touch with their primal side after years of dozing on the couch can be an adjustment.

Barbara Yates had to give her dog Luke an anti-inflammatory after his initial run.

"I took him to the doctor, who said, 'Oh my God, you've overworked him,'" she recalled.

It takes about one outing for a dog paired with an experienced musher to get the hang of pulling, but staying on course can take a little longer. Some pairs will go in opposite directions, chase after rabbits or stop altogether to sniff the air. Then there's the occasional collision.

"It does happen," said Reyes, whose dogs Niko and Lyka have been known to start wrestling in the middle of a run. "They're like the comic relief of the group. I should instill more discipline."

Reyes, who started the Costa Mesa group, has been teaching his huskies the official mushing commands: "gee" for right and "haw" for left, "easy" to slow down and "on-by" to pass.

One musher was stopped recently in a public park by a ranger who told her that scooters, like skateboards, were banned. Others say they endure quips about practicing for the Iditarod, missing the snow or even abusing their dogs. The most common taunt: "Mush!"

"Nobody ever uses the word 'mush,'" said Reyes. "Nobody uses it, not even the actual mushers."

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