

Jamaica, We Have a Dogsled Team

The Iditarod is one of the most rigorous, cold-weather races in the world. So how did Newton Marshall, a resident of Jamaica, end up in the competition?

It takes a certain kind of person to compete in the Iditarod, known as “The Last Great Race on Earth.” While the infamous dogsled competition draws in mushers from all over the world, they tend to be from the colder climes—Norway, Canada, Sweden, and the northern states of the U.S. But one musher this year was a seemingly improbable contender: Newton Marshall hails from St. Anne, Jamaica.

Known to his fans as the Mushin’ Mon, the 30-year-old Marshall ran the 975-mile Iditarod in just under 12 days and six hours, finishing 43rd out of 49 (with an additional 20 competitors having scratched or withdrawn from the race). This was Marshall’s second Iditarod, having finished 47th in the race in 2010. His team ran in some of the toughest conditions in memory, and he even helped save a fellow musher, Scott Janssen, who had been [seriously injured](#) in a remote area of the trail.

But in many ways, the route from Anchorage to Nome was almost the easy part. The sponsors who had supported Marshall’s first Iditarod run had long disappeared, so he raised money through small donations on Facebook ([and continues to do so](#)), assembled a team with dogs borrowed from other mushers, and even overcame his marginal literacy to raise money for a literacy fund in his native Jamaica. Marshall wasn’t one of the fastest mushers, but when it comes to the Iditarod, merely finishing is a true accomplishment.

We spoke to Marshall after he finished the race about how he got his start, the first time he encountered real winter, and if he plays favorites.

Why did you decide to run the Iditarod?

First and foremost, there is no other black man in this race, and I’m the only Jamaican in it. It’s kind of different from my tropical island.

How did you get started?

I worked for a company in Jamaica that did horseback rides, and they were going to start a dog sled tour using a two-passenger, three-wheeled rig because, of course, there’s no snow in Jamaica. I said “Yeah, mon.”

And then they started the Jamaica Dogsled team, and they wanted to send us abroad to do races. Me and a different guy, he did the sprints and I did the distance.

The rest of the team is no more, but I continued because I got deeply involved, and I love the sport.

How long ago was this?

In 2005, we started getting dogs from the pound to run in Jamaica. We wanted to take it a step further and went to the Yukon in December 2007.

Had you ever faced a real winter before?

I was way out of my element. I had never witnessed cold before. My first trip was to Minnesota, people would tell me to pack my long johns, but I don't know what long johns are. It was the end of March and it was zero below, and, soon as I step out of the plane, I feel a cold like I never felt in my life. I said to the guy, "Why do they have to turn on the AC so high." And he said "Brother, it's not the AC. That's the outside." I was completely shocked. I was in a different world.

Was that trip worth it?

The reason for me was to get the experience to see how dogs really run and react so I can get an understanding how to train my dogs in Jamaica.

What was the biggest thing you learned?

This first thing is just to get the bond and the connection with the dogs. You need to understand the dogs before you start running. You have to use your common sense. So many things you have to look out for: How they run. How they look. Are they overheating? Does their gait change? Are they looking wobbly or so forth?

It sounds like you build a real relationship with your team.

You have to be happy so that the dogs can be happy too. They listen to you, and they know you're taking them to a safe place. They trust you.

Talk about the team you brought to the Iditarod this year.

I had to borrow dogs, and it's really tough. I borrowed some dogs from Kathleen Frederick [a musher who had to drop out of the 2010 race when an ice bridge collapsed under her sled], and she wanted to see them get to Nome. And Wade Marris [a fellow musher], he lent me six dogs. They're great people, kind hearted, putting their trust in me with their dogs. These dogs, they're not really competitive, so I was trying to get them competitive. There wasn't much snow this year, so there wasn't much training. But we finished good.

Who's your favorite dog?

Monica is the most important part of the team. She's the lead dog. She led from the start to the finish. She's an Alaskan Husky, kind of a medium-sized dog, black and brown. She's very focused, very sharp in her commands.

As soon as she gets to a checkpoint, she curls up and goes straight to bed. She knows how to reserve herself, because she doesn't know how long the next journey is going to be. As soon as I dish [the dogs'] meals, I put the bowl right close to her mouth, and she eats and goes back to sleep. And after six hours, she's up and ready to go. Go to the bathroom, and she's ready again. She's just an extraordinary dog.

Do you have a particular strategy that's unique?

When I leave one checkpoint, I like to go straight to the next one. I try to get [the dogs'] heads tough enough to know that once we're rolling, we're going to continue rolling. For me camping out in the cold doesn't help me. I really can't sleep in the cold. I tried to sleep many times, but it's so uncomfortable. I can't stay warm.

So I always try to get to the next checkpoint.

So it makes for a pretty long day?

The longest run we had was 10-11 hours, averaging a very nice speed on the trail.

What do the dogs eat?

I snack them in between [checkpoints] with some fish or beef fat, something to give them some quick energy. And water. We grab snow along the way.

What do you eat on the trail?

If it's really cold I don't like eating, unless I'm getting weak and tired. When it's kind of warm, I like to eat crackers or dried salmon sticks and Go-Gurt and stuff like that.

I heard that the conditions were really tough this year.

The trail was really tough. It was the toughest on record. There was almost no snow on the trail. There's sticks sticking up. Rocks. Stumps. And when there's no snow, your brakes don't work. It was very tight and narrow; it was like going through a war zone. [Laughs.] But really, it was all Mother Nature had to offer. A lot of people are black and blue.

So, you helped to rescue another musher who was injured?

The trail was really rough and rugged. I thought it would never end. I thought I would probably die sometime soon. [Laughs.] I saw a sled in front, but I didn't see the musher. So I stopped my team and walked down, and I heard somebody crying out for help.

It was Scott Janssen. His voice was barely loud enough for me to hear. I walked over and said, "What happened to you now?"

"I think I broken my ankle."

I said "Oh Man," We're in the middle of nowhere. The trail is really rough.

I don't have space in my sled. And we didn't have any two-way communication. He said he had a concussion earlier.

First, Scott asked me to bring him over to the sled. But he was in so much pain,

I felt like I was feeling his pain. I almost cried. That didn't work out.

He had the tracking thing, and there's a button on it you can press [to quit the race and summon help.] He didn't want to do it, but he had to.

We saw a snow machine from the guys who were doing the video from the Iditarod. They got out their [satellite] phones, and told them that Scott was really messed up.

Scott was telling me to go on, but he was in so much pain I didn't want to leave him.

But the crew said they'll stay with him. So I went back out on the rough trail.

Were you really concerned about the conditions?

People could have lost their lives. I was worried about the danger for everybody. The dogs, too.

Actually, the dogs love the rough trail. They know they're in control. They know we don't have any power to slow down. They would definitely speed up. They said, "Let's try and kill him."

[Laughs.]

Do you have any rituals or superstitions?

I just always pray when I start out. I beg the Lord to feed my dogs and give them strength, and no injuries to bog them down. And my prayers were answered.

How long did it take you to get to Nome?

Twelve days and four hours.

How did you feel when you crossed the line?

I was very happy to get to the finish line. It's been a while. I was beaten by the elements, but I felt proud of the dog team. They had very little mileage. But we bonded, and they were running great. And I'm doing it for my country.

Would you come back next year?

If I had sponsorship and the right backing. Once you have that, you can focus on training.

How much money does it take to run the Iditarod?

If you have \$50,000, you don't have to be begging people. \$25,000 will just get you there and get you by.

Reading taken from Daily Beast by Allen St. John