

TRAVEL

ern dogs pulling their own weight

contestants for the best costume or handmade sled.

The dog's drivers are known as mushers; at the turn of the century French Canadian miners and trappers called out "*marche, marche!*" (*go, go!*) to their dogs, which sounded like "mush, mush" to the English-speaking miners.

During January and February dog sled clubs, mainly from northeastern Japan and Hokkaido, drive their dogs from race to race. They don't only take along their dogs but the entire family. Their camping equipment turns the dog sled sites into huge campgrounds, featuring outdoor grilling and outdoor playing.

The mornings are busy with preparations: The dogs eat their pre-race muesli — milk, flakes and honey — and huge pieces of red meat; the adults meticulously wax sleds, make hot drinks, attach race numbers and bundle up the kids who run off with bucket and shovel. The dogs yip in shrill voices anticipating the race.

Jinya Otomo and Takashi Sato are members of Nankyoku Tankentai (South Pole Expedition). (The name of their dog sled group commemorates the first Japanese to join a South Pole expedition — and take along sled dogs — in 1912.) Like dog sled racing in Japan, clubs like Nankyoku Tankentai are young — around 2 to 3 years old. As most dogs aren't used to running long distances, only a small number of experienced mushers can participate in longer races: The winner of the 20-km race, Giichi Matsumoto, professionally breeds and trains police dogs near Kushiro.

Although people like him wear baseball caps, heavy leather snow boots, and necklaces of chains and carabiner-like hooks, they are the true "cowboys" of dog sledding.



THE LONGEST SLED DOG RACE ever in Japan — eight dogs pulling their master over a distance of 20 km — drew over 10,000 visitors from all over northern Hokkaido.

PHOTOS BY UTA HARNISCHFEGER

who have lots of space to let their dogs run and little work during the winter months. To train his dogs Matsumoto has them pull his mini-car, accelerating every once in a while to give them a break.

Some, like Matsumoto, who started breeding Siberian huskies three years ago, have discovered sled racing to be their true calling. Twenty-seven-year-old Tokyoite Miki Morita used to be an actress, once playing in a movie starring a Siberian husky. To prepare for the role she lived with the dog for a year — but couldn't part ways with it after the film was finished. Feeling lonely without the dogs, she quit acting and took up part-time jobs which allow her to take off during January and February to train at a farm in Wakkanai.

Though she then trains her

