

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 this frontier. They have weather-beaten faces and many are farmers

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 dogs intensively, they haven't mastered the international mushing language yet: Morita's "chi" (turn right), and "haw" (turn left) most often fall on deaf ears. Thus, in Japan, snowmobiles have to "guide" the dogs during the races.

Although Japan recently joined the 12 countries in the Federation of International Sled Dog Sports, it is likely to take Japan more than just a few years to catch up. Japan's lack of training space is just one of many hurdles.

Compared to the birthplace of dog sled racing, Alaska, with its 1,600-km races across the length of the country, compulsory doping checks at international races and professional breeders and racers, the sled dog sport in Japan is in its infancy.

Without the long dog sled-ding tradition, Matsumoto says, the local breed of dogs isn't comparable either. Today in the U.S. and Europe the greyhound, bred for speed over a 3,000-year period in ancient Egypt, is successfully



FOUR-YEAR-OLD MUSER Fu-chan was the youngest contestant at the two-day sled dog race in Wakkanai, Hokkaido. Though her Irish wolfhound didn't feel the need to run, she trotted along gracefully.

crossbred with Siberian huskies. The greyhound can respire faster, has sharp claws to dig into the snow, and less hair. These are just some features that make the hybrid ideal for shorter speed races. Because in Japan dogs are not yet crossbred, Matsumoto plans a study trip to Canada.

The Japanese dog sled races have become huge family outings, a get-together of friends sharing the same interests and curious spectators. While the longer races seem like serious sports events, the shorter 100-meter family competitions feel like a festival.

Sunday's junior races are especially fun-filled and thrilling. Because the kid-mushers don't have firm con-

trol over the dogs yet, all club members have to shout and encourage the dogs to the finish line. After Viola, a brown-haired Irish wolfhound, pulled 4-year-old musher Fu-chan 10 meters, she lost interest. Smelling the candy bar of a sideline spectator, she walked off the track.

Other young mushers, like Nobu-kun, end up swapping roles. When his dog, the Saint-Bernard Musashi, sits down on the track, the musher picks him up, puts him on the sled and pulls him over the finish line.

Later that evening, Nobu-kun inhales his dinner. What does he like about mushing? Forking in a mouthful of fish he says: "It's very, very tiring."