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Canicross comes to Dufferin County thanks to local athlete

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The bond between a dog and their owner is a special one, and one local runner is hoping to help strengthen that connection through a growing outdoor sport.

Mono resident Shawn Sobon is the founder of Canadian Canicross Sports, an organization that looks to educate, promote, and develop racing events surrounding the sport of canicross.

Canicross is known in the running world as the sport of cross-country running with dogs. Runners utilize hands-free running equipment consisting of a belt and harness that allows the dog to run in front and pull them along, while also giving verbal commands for direction and speed.

An avid runner for more than a decade, Sobon first became acquainted with canicross in 2018 after adopting his family dog ? Piper.

?When we got Piper, I had decided to bring her on runs with me, and it was through my contacts in the running world that I learned about the sport of canicross,? explained Sobon. ?The thing I noticed immediately was the connection I had with my dog while we were running. It wasn't just me running with her or her with me; we were working as a team, and it was a really special experience.?

Wanting to share a similar experience with other runners and their dogs, Sobon began looking at ways of promoting the sport and teaching people about it.

?The bond that we were creating, through doing the sport together, was unlike any bond I'd experienced with any dog I've had in my life,? added Sobon.

His first step in sharing the sport came in 2021 with the launch of a six-week program teaching runners and their dogs the basics of canicross, including using verbal commands, special equipment, and healthy running practices.

He then went on to develop a series of racing events for runners and their dogs to take part in locally.

The first Canadian Canicross Sports race, called the Trails and Tails Classic, was held in November 2022 at the Mansfield Outdoors Centre. The event included a five-kilometre and 10-kilometre race distance as well as a fun run for those without special canicross equipment to participate.

Off the success of the first event, Sobon launched a second race in the spring of 2023 at Monora Park in Orangeville called the Muddy Paw.

The newest addition to the racing series is the Snowy Paws Canicross Race, which will be held at 9 a.m. on Saturday (Jan. 14) at Island Lake in Orangeville. The race will consist of the same distance format as the previous Canadian Canicross Sports races.

Each Canadian Canicross Sports race looks to make a charitable contribution to a dog-related cause. The Snowy Paws race will be making a donation to the Friends of Island Lake to help benefit the Island Lake Conservation Area.

Spectators are encouraged to attend the canicross race at Island Lake to show their support for the two-legged and four-legged teammates and to learn more about the sport.

While participation in the local canicross races has been fairly small, with an average of 50 to 60 people per race, Sobon noted that the demand for the sport is there, with attendees from across the province, out of province, and even out of the country, travelling to participate in the events.

?The dedication of people who run with their dogs is pretty remarkable,? said Sobon.

Speaking with the Free Press, Sobon added the benefits of canicross for both humans and dogs.

?Canicross has completely changed the way I look at running. Before, I was always focused on how far I was running, but now it's really all about my dog and their enjoyments. The days where I don't feel motivated to get out and run, what gets me out the door is my responsibility and dedication to my dog.?