



STAMINA: Noel Hanna during in the Sahara Race

Team takes on terrains nature

The Eco-Challenge is one of the hardest endurance races in the world. Competitors must cover 500km in 12 days using anything from rafts to kayaks and horses. GEOFF HILL spoke to members of the only Irish team to complete the course as they prepare to do it all over again

AT first glance, Roger Warnock looks relatively sane; bright-eyed, clean cut and the owner of the Raw Outdoors shop in Hillsborough.

On close examination, it becomes obvious that the 31-year-old is completely bonkers; not only is he leaving behind a perfectly comfortable armchair to run up and down mountains every day, but in October he's off to New Zealand to spend over a week doing even more of it.

The teams from all over the world taking part in the Eco-Challenge endurance race have up to 12 days to cover 500km by foot, horseback, raft, mountain-bike, rock-climbing, kayak and horse. The top teams will do it in six days, sleeping no more than an hour a night.

"That'll be the easiest bit. I've got two young kids, so I'm used to it," grinned Roger yesterday over a cup in the village coffee shop.

At least he's got an excuse.

Although he's a seasoned mountain marathon runner, this will be his first Eco-Challenge, so he doesn't know how bad it can be.

Noel Hanna, on the other hand, has already done two, and he's still doing it again.

Mind you, he's the sort of man who sets off for a 140-mile run across Death Valley, the hottest place on earth, the way the rest of us nip down to the shops.

He finished 10th in the Death Valley race, the same year he finished 30th out of 600 in a 140-mile race across the Sahara and two years after he was first in a 100-mile dash across the Himalayas.

He took teams to the Eco-Challenge for the past two years in Argentina and Borneo, finishing 26th and 27th out of 75, and this year has rounded up a team which he hopes will get a place in the teens: himself; Roger; 30-year-old mountain marathon runner Gary Robinson from Enniskillen; and Lynn Stark, a 39-year-old triathlete and Irish bodybuilding champion from Belfast.

Lynn's a representative for Clarins, so at

least the lads will be well cleansed, toned and moisturised.

They're also talking to a specialist on power-napping so they won't have to bother about troublesome things like a good night's sleep during the event.

In fact, from what Noel says, they won't even be bothering with sleep after it finishes.

"The truth is, the five days' partying after the last Eco-Challenge took more out of me than the seven days of the race. Once you finish, you're exhausted but you're on such a high you can't sleep.

"In Argentina, we finished at midnight and thought we'd get in the pizza, open a few bottles of Black Bush and wait for a Malaysian team who were just behind us. But they'd got lost, so we were still there at six in the morning, with the Bush well gone. And that was just the start of it.

"There's great comradeship between the teams after the event, although some of the teams finish not speaking to each other."

But that's in October. Before all that, it's work, work work - training four hours a day, running half marathons at weekends with rucksacks on their backs and making sure that they're all up to speed in every sense with every mode of transport they're going to have to use.

"There's no point in having someone on the team who's brilliant at one skill. We all need to be good at everything, especially since the whole team has to finish," said Noel.

"It will be tough. The top teams from the States are sponsored enough to train for this full-time, although even that doesn't guarantee success: one of them got \$150,000 last year and they didn't finish the race.

"We have the opposite problem. It will cost us £35,000 to do this, most of which we'll have to raise ourselves. We're getting some equipment from Sprayway and other suppliers but even though we're the only Irish team ever to finish the Eco-Challenge, we wrote to the Northern Ireland Sports Council asking for help and they didn't even bother replying."

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