

Local leads team in world's most gruelling challenge



by SUSAN MATHAI

A DROMARA man has returned home after successfully captaining the first Irish team to complete the world's most gruelling outdoor challenge.

Noel Hanna, a 32-year-old civil servant, led the four-strong cross border sports team that undertook the Eco-Challenge in Patagonia, Argentina earlier this month.

The challenge involved participants kayaking along mountain lakes, negotiating waterfalls and rapids, climbing glaciers, navigating dense bamboo forests and riding on horseback along the windswept terrain of the Andes.

Along with team mates

Tommy Flavin from Killarney, who works as a linesman for ESB; Ursula McPherson from Letterkenny, the director of an Outdoor Education Centre, and Fraser Crawford, a shop manager from Belfast, the team competed against 54 other groups from 32 countries earlier this month.

"Teams are allowed three weeks to complete the challenge, we took seven days and 14 hours and came 25th overall," Noel told the Star.

"We are the first Irish team ever to complete the challenge and before we went our aim was to take it steady and finish; next time however, we will be entering on a more competitive basis."

Followed

On the Eco-Challenge course the teams, whose day-to-day progress was followed closely by The Discovery Channel's camera crews, had to travel 300 miles non-stop to a finish line via a series of checkpoints.

IRISH TEAM CELEBRATE COMPLETING TOUGH ECO-CHALLENGE FOR FIRST TIME

Participants were only allowed to use non-motorised transportation such as canoes, mountain bikes, white water rafts, horses, their feet and climbing ropes.

There were no required resting points on the Patagonian course, which meant team members had to get by on as little sleep as they could to make it to the finish line in as short a time as possible.

The weather conditions the Irish team were faced with in Patagonia were

extreme.

"Temperatures ranged from 80 degrees, to areas where there were three to four inches of snow," said Noel, who won his first ultra-marathon in the Himalayas three years ago by running 100 miles in under 16 hours.

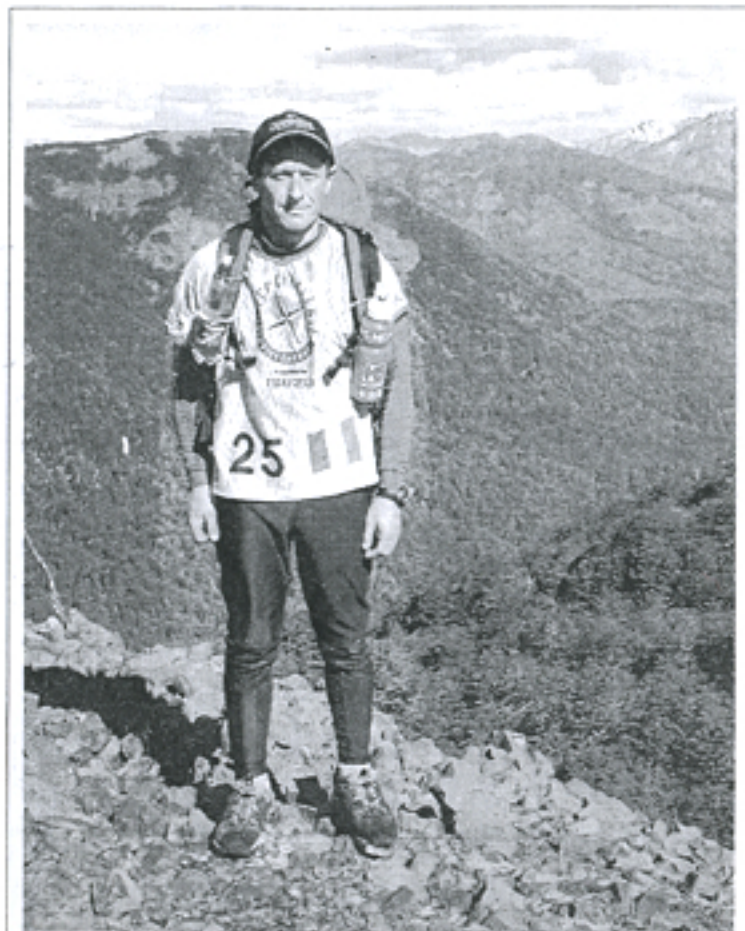
Whole

"It was arduous but that was part of the whole experience, it was tough yet we all got a big buzz out of competing and completing the race after

getting through the challenges presented by the very different conditions along the route."

Despite the rigours of the event Noel, who does his training in the Mourne Mountains and in the sea at Newcastle, said he was already planning to get a team together for this year's event which is scheduled to take place in the late summer.

"It is set to take place in Borneo and if everything goes to plan we will be there," he said.



Noel Hanna taking part in the Eco Challenge. US02/602SG.



Fraser Crawford from Belfast, Noel Hanna, captain, from Dromara, Timmy Flavin and Ursula McPherson from Killarney during the Discovery Channel Eco Challenge in Patagonia. US02/601SG.