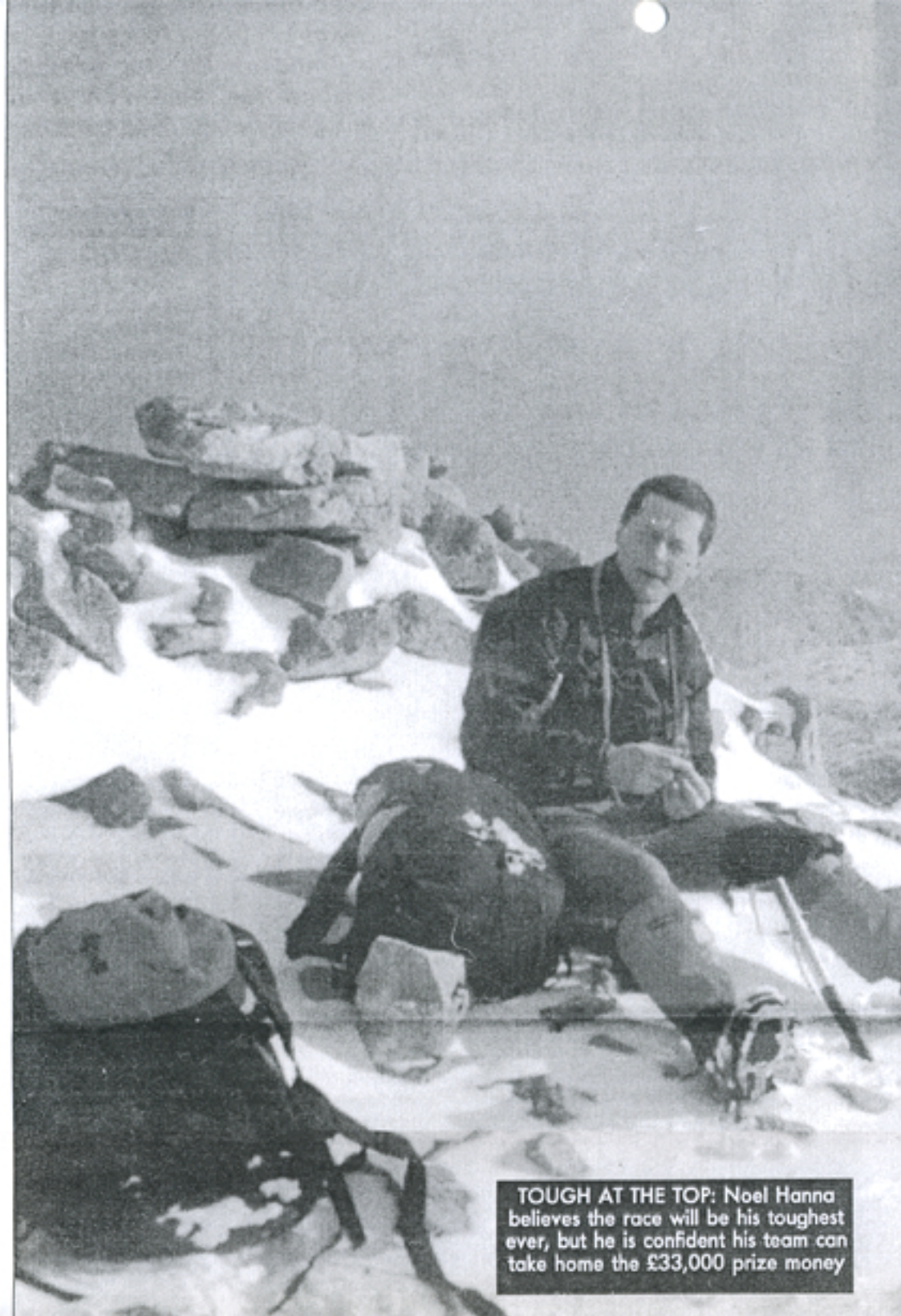


How many people would kayak down glacier-fed rivers, ice climb and navigate a dense forest in the name of peace?



TOUGH AT THE TOP: Noel Hanna believes the race will be his toughest ever, but he is confident his team can take home the £33,000 prize money

WORLD'S TOUGHEST FEAT OF ENDURANCE

Report by **KATY WEITZ**

riding, canoeing, sea-kayaking and fixed ropes.

Noel, who won his first ultramarathon in the Himalayas three years ago by running 100 miles in under 16 hours, said: "I think the fixed ropes will be the most difficult because we can't do it on our own and we will be going down a sheer rock face.

"There's no question it's dangerous, but I get a real buzz from it. The horse-riding will be interesting because we're all novices. I haven't ridden a horse in 20 years," he said.

Noel's team-mates are Tommy Flavin, 42, from Killarney, who is a linesman for ESB; Ursula McPherson, 42, from Letterkenny, director of an Outdoor Education Centre and Fraser Crawford, 40, from Belfast, who is a shop manager.

Amazingly, Noel found his team-mates simply by advertising in local newspapers.

He said: "I simply put an advert

in and got an amazing response."

In the end Noel had to hand-pick the North-South team according to their levels of fitness and experience.

And each one specialises in a particular sport.

Ursula, the most experienced out of the four, is the first female to have crossed from Dublin to Hollyhead in a single kayak.

She is also the third European Champion and fifth World Champion surf skier.

Triathlon

Tommy has been ice and snow climbing for 27 years and Fraser is one of the top fell runners in Northern Ireland. He's also competed in the Scottish coast to coast triathlon.

Noel said: "There was another team from Dublin trying to get on to this year's Eco-challenge but never made it. We're the only Irish team and I think they picked us because of our cross-border nature."

They still need £12,000 to get them out to Patagonia and any money made on top of their sponsorship will be donated to the Malcolm Sergeant Cancer Fund.

So far they have only managed to raise a few hundred pounds, but Noel is optimistic about getting other sponsors on board.

"There are several television companies interested in tracking our progress during training and the course is being backed by The Discovery Channel, so I'm pretty confident we'll raise the money," he said.

Noel, who works as a fitness instructor in his spare time, started racing to raise money for pioneering cancer research at Belfast's Royal Victoria Hospital after his wife, Joan, suffered a brain tumour.

Noel collected £15,000 for the fund when he beat the world's athletes to become the first Brit to take home the Himalayan prize.

Joan said: "Noel never does things in half measures and when he said he wanted to run in the Himalayas I should have known he'd end up doing something amazing. I'm the proudest woman in the world."

And despite all the applause and adulation, Noel maintained the greatest reward for his gruelling sprint was raising the money.

"Joan wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for the hospital. I wanted to raise money for the RVH appeal because the hospital saved Joan's life," he said.

"Racing in the Himalayas two years ago inspired me to do more and since then I've kept my level of fitness up.

"It was a big shock winning two years ago because I was up against professional athletes from all over the world and it was my first marathon."

But Noel says this could be his toughest race ever.

On the Eco-Challenge course the team will travel 300 miles non-stop, 24 hours a day, to a finish line via a series of checkpoints.

They will only use non-motorised transportation such as canoes, kayaks, mountain bikes, white water rafts, horses, their feet and climbing ropes.

There are no required resting points on the Patagonian course and last year's winners completed the course in seven days, averaging two hours sleep a night.

But despite the competition, Noel is confident his team can take home the £33,000 prize money.

Noel hasn't always been an ace athlete - he said that when he was younger he used to be very lazy.

In September last year Noel came 19th out of 170 competitors in the Los Angeles Crest 100 mile race.

He said: "I wanted to run that race within 24 hours and I made it 15 minutes within the 24 hour mark."

"Some people might be surprised by the ages of the team but the 1 and 19-year-olds just don't have enough experience or stamina.

"It's only 39 and 40-year-olds who can stand the challenge. And we've got the perfect combination of age and experience."

A CROSS-BORDER sports team is to take on the world's toughest outdoor challenge in the name of peace.

The four members of 'North-South' will travel to Patagonia, Argentina, to embark on Eco-Challenge, a gruelling 10-day endurance course.

They will be the only Irish team to compete against 54 other groups from 32 countries in the November race.

The hardy hopefuls will risk their lives kayaking along mountain lakes, negotiating waterfalls and rapids, navigating through dense bamboo forests, and riding on horseback along the windswept terrain of the Andes.

The idea for a cross-border group came from the team captain, civil servant Noel Hanna, 32, from Co Down, who wanted athletes from both communities to work together.

He has even won the support of Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Mo Mowlam.

"There are currently very few sports where athletes from both sides work together as a team," said Noel.

"And multi-sports are not widely known over here - people are either into football or rugby."

Six different sports make up the Eco-challenge: ice-climbing, rock-climbing, mountaineering, horse