

# River Deep

Ballynahinch man  
heads off to  
conquer The Andes

# Mountain High

**FOUR** people will reach for the skies next month in hope that the Gods offer inspiration not only for a perilous trek across one of earth's most dangerous mountain ranges but for lasting peace at home.

By Maurice Fitzmaurice

The team, led by Ballynahinch man Noel Hanna, is to run, canoe, climb and use what ever means possible (so long as they are not mechanised) to traverse 310 miles across the South American Andes.

But inspiration for the cross border/cross community team came from the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, says Mr. Hanna, hence a little hope for divine intervention in more than lifting the spirits of what looks to be four athletes pushed to the extremes of their ability.

Mr. Hanna's trip across some of the most daunting terrain on the planet is part of the Eco Challenge run, an event which will see 54 teams of four from 34 countries battle it out for supremacy.

The event, which has been testing the endurance of earth's finest for several years now, switches venue annually to stop veterans, those brave enough to try for a second time, gaining any advantage over novice competitors. Noel Hanna and his three team mates, from Killarney, Belfast and Letterkenny, are all novices but still unswayed by the test of their mettle that lies ahead.



Noel gets in shape for the expedition.

"We all can't wait to get out there and get started, but of course it is a pretty daunting

event and we will have to work hard as a team to get over it," Mr. Hanna says.

"The whole thing is about mental powers as well as fitness in that you have to think hard about what you are doing and plan things as a team. You might have three in the team who are super fit and another who isn't so fit but has excellent orienteering skills and they would be likely to finish first because of that."

The arduous tasks which face the Hillsborough Castle civil servant include ice climbing, general mountain climbing, white water rafting in ice cold rivers, kayaking, horse riding and orienteering to name but a few.

And as if such physical pains lying ahead was not enough to convince you to stay at home the

cost of the 12 day escapade for the team is around £15,000.

"It is certainly expensive, but then there is the flight over there as well as internal flights and then considering what we are going to have to do we want to get ourselves the best equipment possible," he says.

"We have to get two suits for the water sections of the course, a dry suit costs around £350, we have to use the best a the lightest gear like our ruck sacks etc so it is certainly mounting up, but then if you are to have any sort of advantage that's what you have to do."

Though if anyone thinks this team has little or no experience of putting themselves through hell in the name of a great challenge they would be

## South American Adventure

mistaken. Just two years ago the 32-year-old decided over a pint with a friend (so no, he does not abstain from all life's pleasures) that they would do something a little different. The man was true to his word.

"After I decided to do something different I ran 100 miles across the Himalayas. As well as being a little different I managed to raise £18,000 for brain tumour research too," he said.

"And as for having a pint I even like a Chinese take away too. I eat the same as anyone else, there's no special diet with me."

But, though there may not be any special diet the Ballynahinch man does do a wee bit of training now and again.

Fitness instructor at the Burrendale Country Club, Eamonn Caughey says the long time member comes to the club regularly and has some rather strenuous fitness routines.

Such is the man's craving for the challenge of the seemingly impossible he has also ran 110 miles across the world's hottest place, Death Valley last July.

"If he is coming up to an event he will come every day and he tends to run from Ballynahinch to here then do some weights or have a swim. If he feels like a change he'll drive here and take a run up the Mourne and then do weights or swimming," he says.

However with the teams only being given two days to acclimatise at the foot of the South American mountain range after landing in Buenos Aries and then taking an internal flight to Argentina it will be an uphill battle in more ways than one.

But though the Ballynahinch man says he is looking forward to getting back in time for Christmas after the gruelling event he is already planning on taking part in next year's fixture, this time in Borneo.



Noel faces a gruelling challenge in the Andes.



Left: Noel is wished every success by Women's Coalition members Monica McWilliams, Anne Carr and Jane Morris.