

Trio show mettle in world Eco Challenge



Irish first: Fraser Crawford, Noel Hanna, Timmy Flavin and Ursula McPherson created history by finishing the world's toughest endurance race

By Gary Grattan

THREE intrepid men and a woman are celebrating after becoming the first Irish team to complete the world's toughest endurance race.

Team captain Noel Hanna (32), from Dromara, Belfast man Fraser Crawford (40), Timmy Flavin from Killarney and Ursula McPherson from Letterkenny, Co Donegal, both 42, are catching their breath after competing in the Eco Challenge in Patagonia, Argentina, last month.

Fifty-four teams from 33 countries took part in the gruelling competition. Sixteen didn't finish but the Irish contingent came home in 25th position, completing the race in seven days - well inside the allotted 12.

Now Noel, who works as a civil servant, is setting his sights on next year's Eco Challenge, which takes place in Borneo in August.

Noel and Fraser, a shop manager, advertised in specialist magazines for two other climbing enthusiasts from the Republic to join them in the Irish team - ensuring it was a true cross-border effort.

"We thought it would be symbolic after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement," explained Noel, who, like his colleagues, prepared for Patagonia with a spot of ice and rock climbing in Scotland.

The climax of the challenge was scaling a 12,000 ft glaciated summit, Tronador, four-and-a-half times higher than Slieve Donard.

"We had to swim 200 metres out to canoes in a freezing cold lake and then spent the next 14 hours canoeing, finishing up at 11pm after travelling 55-60 miles.

"We carried the boats along 2,000 metres of river bank in the pitch dark, with millions of horse flies attacking us. Next up was a 50-70 metre swim across a fast

flowing river - and then, at around midnight, we got on our horses and kept riding until 4pm the following afternoon," explained Noel.

The team proved to have an excellent working relationship.

"Everyone really fitted in and all the decisions were made together. Never at any stage did I ask myself what I was doing there. It was a wonderful experience for us all.

"We made a decision not to push on too hard and run the risk of not finishing. We were determined to be the first Irish team to do it. The top five teams averaged just five-eight hours sleep over the course of the entire event. We got a bit more than that.

"One woman in the Finish team burst blood vessels in her feet so that the swelling would go down and she could get her feet back into her trainers. That's how committed some people were - although, personally, I

think that's taking things a bit far".

Noel said he wished to thank everyone who donated equipment and money towards the cost of the venture. He has appealed for further help for the Borneo event - and also hopes to contact people keen to form part of the team.

"Potential sponsors will get worldwide television coverage." The Discovery Channel were the main sponsors of the Patagonian Challenge and have recorded two four-hour programmes.

Noel can be contacted on 0411 216612 (mobile) or 01238-565895 (home).



Hard climb: Noel Hanna half way up Tronador Mountain