

PUB TALK SPARKED HIMALAYA CHALLENGE PIONEER NOEL IS SUMMIT TO SEA

AFTER a few pints most of us have made promises that in the cold and often painful light of the following morning were tactically forgotten.

Something like promising to run a 100 mile stage race through the Himalayas would be a typical 10 pint or so conversation, and was a prospect Noel Hanna found himself discussing with his friend one night in a Belfast pub.

They'll both recently turned 36, and thought such an ultra-challenge would be a good way to honour a landmark year, despite the fact that neither of them had so run so much as a marathon before in their lives.

The most surprising thing was that when they both woke up the next morning, the previous night's plan wasn't consigned to the silly, drunken conversations file.

Surprised

For the next three months they trained together in the Mourne Mountains, and they must have trained pretty hard, because when they went to the Himalayas, Hanna surprised even himself by winning the race outright.

"The first three days of the race were all on really bad trails, but luckily I'd been training on similar tracks in the Mourne so it suited me down to the ground.

"70% of these things is in the mind. If you can put your mind to it and stay mentally strong, then you can achieve anything."

That was back in 1997, and ever since then, Hanna has run in multiple adventure races and ultra-marathons all over the globe.

His greatest athletic achievement yet, came last month, when he completed the 'summit to sea-level challenge', by becoming the first person ever to climb Mount Everest, and then immediately cycle to the Bay of Bengal in India.

"Originally I'd decided my next challenge would be to climb the seven summits - the highest mountains on all seven continents," he says.

"When I looked up the statistics, I saw that quite a few people had already done it, so I rang up the Guinness Book of records and found out nobody had ever climbed to the highest peak and then travelled immediately to sea-level by human power alone so

There was sewage on the road and I could taste it as it came up off the wheel,

I decided to do that."

After an initial failed attempt due to retinal haemorrhage in both his eyes, there was no stopping him last May.

He felt so strong, he even left his Sherpa and far more experienced climbing partner behind him on the final ascent.

As he scaled the final few hundred metres, he had to climb over and around all the dead bodies that litter the slope of the mountain, some just days old, others that had been lying there for years.

"A member of our team from the previous year by the name of Marco had died at the snowfield at 8,800, and sure enough when I got there I could recognise him," he said.

"Just 13 months previously I'd been chatting to him down at base camp, so it was a really sobering experience."

When most people get to the summit of Everest, they hang around for just a couple of minutes before descending again, in order to conserve as much energy and body warmth as possible, but Hanna felt so comfortable he hung around for half an hour.

"I was just standing there on this mountain on my own thinking to myself that there's no-one in the world higher



with JOHN HARRINGTON

than me right now. I'm closer to heaven than anyone still alive," he recalled.

His challenge was only half-completed though. Now he had to get to the Bay of Bengal. One of his co-climbers, Henrik from Sweden, probably said what everyone else in the group was thinking: "And now you're cycling to sea-level? You're fucking crazy."

Inhospitable

From base-camp, it took him just eleven days to complete the 1,800km journey to the sea despite cycling through some of the most inhospitable terrain in the world.

"Some of the days I was cycling 120km, and one of the days in India I cycled over 200km.

"Luckily enough, there was an early monsoon and there

was two days where it rained. So it was pleasant cycling in the warm rain, because it was overcast and there was no sun.

"The downside to the rain was that whenever you cycled through villages and towns, raw sewage was running across the roads, and you could taste it as it came up off the bicycle wheel."

"Finally when I got to the sea, I really wanted a picture of myself in the water, so I had to walk nearly an hour out through muck up to my knees to get to the water. That was the last test."

Back home in Dromara now, Hanna isn't quite ready to put his feet up just yet.

He's planned another summit to sea level challenge in August from Mount Elbrus, but this time he'll have some company. His wife Lynn.

HE DID IT:
Hanna at the Bay of Bengal and (right) at Mount Everest

