

Northern Man catches up with some

GREAT ADVENTURERS



WHACKY Racer

Noel reckons Noel Hanna (34) must be mad. One gets the impression that he is one of those guys who will try just about anything once. Since 1997 he's been trotting the globe and taking on challenges that most men would cower at. He can almost certainly claim to have single-handedly introduced Northern Ireland to the sport of Endurance Adventure Racing - this is a (so-called) sport (or torture, depending on your viewpoint) which involves testing your body to its absolute limits. Noel caught the adventure racing bug after winning a 100-mile stage individual race across the Himalayas in 1997; the fact that he raised £18,000 for the Royal Victoria Hospital in the process was just an added bonus. In 1999 he completed his first Eco Challenge in Argentina. This year Northern Ireland's own Endurance Adventure Racing Team goes to compete in New Zealand in October. The four members (all already experienced marathon runners) are Noel, Gary Robinson, Rodger Warnock and Lynn Stark and they will compete against teams from 74 other countries. They will have 12 days to cover 500 km via novel modes of transport that includes lake kayaking, pack-rafting, mountain biking, fixed ropes and horseback riding. If they want to win they will have to survive on an hour's sleep per day. A tall order you might think - especially when you consider that each member will be carrying all of their own supplies in a

backpack weighing 20kg! It is not surprising that this is regarded as the toughest race in the world. "Last year (in Borneo) our team finished 27th overall - one of our team members, Ian Cummings from Warrenpoint, was the youngest person in history to finish the race - he was 17," says Noel proudly. In fact Noel's team has been placed in the last two years so this year's entrants have quite a reputation to live up to. So what is it actually like to take part in something like this?

"During the race you can expect to eat badly," he says, "filling up on hi-sugar junk food such as jellybeans and chocolate and coffee beans - anything to give you energy and keep you awake." Eighty per cent of competitors can expect to contract leptospirosis - a form of food poisoning contracted from drinking water infected with rat urine! Ugh! "Every country presents its own hazards" admits Noel after telling me stories about leeches and that time in Death Valley California that a sandstorm blew up and he feared for his life... "That's why preparation is so important."

Preparation in this case means twice-a-day training on weekdays with a six-seven hour stint on Saturdays and Sundays, and not for Noel the leisurely comforts of an indoor gym - he's more likely to be seen scaling Slieve Donard than propping up a treadmill. It's also a fairly expensive leisure pursuit "I reckon it will cost \$13,500 for our team to race this year" admits Noel, yet despite the costs he is convinced that "there is a growing interest in the sport."

Noel assures me, "It's getting a lot of coverage on Sky Sports and I've met many racers over the age of 50. So why does he do it? For Noel the highlights of his sports career to date include watching an Argentinian sunrise atop Mount Trcondore and trekking through virgin jungle with monkeys swinging all around. Me? I think I'll just watch on TV."

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NOEL'S SPORTS CV

- 1997** Finished 1st out of 40 in a Himalayan 100-mile stage race
- 1998** Finished 19th out of 170 in Los Angeles Crest 100-miles race
- 1999** Finished 30th out of 600 in Sahara 140-mile desert race
- 1999** Finished 10th in Death Valley 140-mile race (from the lowest point to highest in North America)
- 1999** Finished 26th in Eco-Challenge Argentina race
- 2000** Finished in Irish Adrenaline Rush race
- 2000** Finished 27th in Eco-Challenge Borneo race
- 2001** Competing in Eco-Challenge



● A sandstorm in Death Valley, 1999



● Taking time out in Borneo, 2000



● Making ropes work at Ben Crom Dam in the adrenaline Rush race, 2000



● Scaling mount Trenadore, Argentina, 1999