

## VOLUNTEERING &amp; FUNDRAISING

# The ice man cometh

Mark Pollock tells **Anne Giacomantonio** why he refused to let blindness stop him racing to the South Pole

**T**he end of university brings opportunity and possibility for most people but for Mark Pollock from Northern Ireland, the loss of his sight months before graduating made him drastically reassess his future. Pollock had to change his plans to become an investment banker, but undeterred he began to undertake a series of extreme challenges. In the 10 years since losing his sight through a degenerative illness, the 32-year-old has thrown himself into charity work and now earns a living as a motivational speaker and author. He completed six marathons in one week in the Gobi desert, ran the world's coldest marathon in the North Pole and kayaked across the Irish Sea, to name just a few of his achievements.

## 'The history behind the race to the South Pole and the race format were both really attractive to me'

In January, he took part in a race that recreated Amundsen and Scott's scramble for the South Pole nearly 100 years ago. Pollock's team competed against five others, including a British team led by Olympic gold medal-winner James Cracknell that also included TV presenter Ben Fogle. Pollock's team crossed the line in a close fifth place, with a Norwegian team coming first and Cracknell's team in second place.

Now something of a veteran of the adventure race circuit, Pollock says the South Pole challenge got his blood pumping. "The history behind the race and the race format as opposed to just an expedition were really attractive and it's the only thing available in Antarctica of its kind."

Teams compete over a distance of 800km, after a 200km warm-up, although Pollock's team had to cover a little more distance due to emergency medical treatment. Their team, South Pole Flag, skied 15 hours a day covering the distance in 22 days in temperatures reaching -48C. In conditions where the

snow is not always flat and the icy winds sting any exposed skin, team members had to pull 70kg of supplies behind them in *pulks* (sleds).

Pollock says preparations for the race were like scenes from *Rocky*. "Lots of chin-ups and running on the beach with tackle bags, dragging tyres and running up sand dunes. All that sort of stuff; good old-fashioned hard training."

And that was before he had even set foot on the snow. The six teams had one chance to size each other up at a polar training camp in Austria prior to the trip. "It was all very understated but there was that element of competition."

Team South Pole Flag also had a frustrating preparation in Norway a month before the race. "Before I arrived, I hadn't tested skiing while pulling the full weight," he says. The team's biggest hurdle, however, was working out a system that allowed Pollock to follow his teammate Simon O'Donnell. "We ended up redesigning and re-jigging this system where I was behind Simon on two carbon fibre poles coming off his sled which then attached to my ski poles. I just followed behind Simon all the way."

Pollock was determined not to let his blindness hold the team up, as the last blind man to attempt the journey was travelling well under the average daily speed required to be in the race. He says it was a comfort to know that even his ex-Norwegian army teammate, Inge Solheim, found the race tough going at times.

The journey included a few hiccups including a small diversion of 60km, which hit hard on morale at the time, and emergency medical treatment to O'Donnell's hands and face meant they were pipped at the post and fell into fifth position. "It doesn't take away from the fantastic feeling that I had when we went across the line and got to the Pole."

"We could have coasted along and taken another couple of days but I doubt that without those tough times it would have meant so much." Even without his sight, Pollock is still in the competition.

Mark Pollock will be speaking about his experiences at One Life Live. For audio diaries, visit [www.southpoleflag.com](http://www.southpoleflag.com)



Freeze frame: Mark Pollock reaches the South Pole, carrying a flag dotted with pictures of supporters [WWW.MARKPOLLOCK.COM](http://www.markpollock.com)

## MAKE A DIFFERENCE



Gary Barlow is climbing Kilimanjaro in aid of Comic Relief GETTY IMAGES

**If you would like to experience the thrill of completing a challenge that also benefits a community or charity of your choice, here are three suggestions from the long list attending the One Life Live exhibition at Olympia.**

### Charity Challenge

A UK company that organises fundraising expeditions for individuals or corporate groups. They are responsible for the team of celebrities, including Chris Moyles, Cheryl Cole and Gary Barlow, who are climbing Mount Kilimanjaro for Comic Relief. With adventurous activities including mountain bike rides, horse rides, white-water rafting and treks,

there is bound to be an activity to get involved in. With five years' experience and a devotion to the ideals of responsible tourism, Charity Challenge will take care of the organisation, leadership and administration of the challenge you choose. To date, they have raised over £18m for over 900 charities, including Barnardo's, the NSPCC and Diabetes UK. [www.charitychallenge.com](http://www.charitychallenge.com)

### AidCamps International

With specialist focus on communities in developing countries, AidCamps International work with local partner organisations to provide grassroots help with what's needed in communities.

Choose anything from a three-week to a three-month long project in a group or as an individual. You are asked to finance your own costs while on the project, including flights, visas and living costs. Volunteers are also asked to fundraise to help meet the costs of the project. "The main problem of communities in these countries is not people power; it's the lack of the funds needed to implement local improvements," says AidCamps. [www.aidcamps.org](http://www.aidcamps.org)

### Family Friends

Closer to home, Family Friends provides selected and trained volunteers from a wide range of

backgrounds to provide support and help for families from disadvantaged backgrounds. Based in the London boroughs of Kensington and Chelsea and Hammersmith and Fulham, the charity has 15 years of experience matching volunteers to families in need. You can help by donating two hours a week to spend with a family in their home, either by providing support for a parent, a child between five and 16, or a child under five. Volunteers provide practical and emotional support which can make a real difference to the behaviour of children and even their academic success. [www.familyfriend.org.uk](http://www.familyfriend.org.uk)