

**This interview with Monica Igoe appeared in the ‘Money and Jobs’ section of the Irish Examiner, February 8, 2002. It is reprinted with the kind permission of the newspaper.**

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# **Economist ended run on frozen assets**



**Interview: Monica Igoe**  
**Name: Richard Donovan**  
**Age: 35**  
**Job: Economist**

**R**ichard Donovan became an economist to “accommodate a varied lifestyle.” The contract nature of the work suits him well, he says, with a smile. “I do enough to get by.” Just back from winning the first-ever marathon to the South Pole, he cuts a relaxed figure sitting on the settee in his Galway apartment stroking a very obese pet cat. Look a bit closer, however, and you’ll notice the tops of his fingers are white – frost bite. The circulation, meanwhile, has yet to return to his toes.

Run at polar altitude (10,000 ft) and in a temperature of minus 50 degrees centigrade with the wind chill factor, the conditions for the marathon were far from ideal.

Small wonder he suffered snow blindness, hypothermia and frostbite en route. Yet when Mr. Donovan reached the finish line, despite the excruciating pain and fatigue, he kept on running.

On he ran past the American scientists from the Amundsen-Scott station who had come out to see the winner home. When he finally stopped, another three kilometres later, he was so weak that he had to be put on a drip.

Nevertheless, Mr. Donovan reckons it was a good start to his grand plan, which is to run seven ultra marathons on seven continents in 2002.

An ultra-marathon is anything longer than a marathon. The target is to raise over 300,000 for GOAL and the Galway Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

In between it all, however, he must keep his business, CEA Economic Consultants, ticking over. Generally speaking, his passion for running and his work sit well together, he says: “Out training you can twig something that is the hub of an argument and that can redirect a whole submission or whatever you are working on. Running is a great problem solver.”

The skills he’s learnt in business come in handy when it comes to getting through the mountains of administration and fund-raising that precede any ultra-marathon. The entrance fee for the South Pole race alone was \$25,000, for example – the same as the prize money. Accenture (formerly Andersen Consulting) chipped in heavily.

Although, that’s not to say he hadn’t had to dig deep into his own pocket as well.

The South Pole marathon was originally scheduled for January 8. However, for two whole weeks, weather conditions meant the athletes were holed up at the Canadian organisers’ (Adventure Network International) base near the Ellsworth Mountains, where the mountaineers and wealthy day-trippers go. They whiled away the time making igloos and, as Mr. Donovan puts it “chilling out with the snow,” eating freeze-dried packer meals to keep their strength up. And all the time praying for the weather conditions to improve so that they could be flown further inland to the Plateau, the flat sheet of ice where the race would be run.

Eventually, it was agreed that January 20 would be the day. So,

togged out in balaclavas, goggles, facemasks, neck gaitors, and layers of special clothing, the runners lined up exactly 26.2 miles from the South Pole.

They’d scarcely gone two miles, however, when there was a ‘white out,’ which he says is “when you can’t tell the ground from the sky.” The next break in the weather wasn’t for another two days, but by then, only three of the athletes would participate. The rest settled for doing a half marathon around the Pole.

Antarctica can be an unnerving experience. It’s a surreal environment and there’s no way of telling how people will react, which is why the Scottish doctor with the group came equipped with anti-psychotic drugs. “There’s a plaque at the Pole with what Scott said when he got there, namely that ‘this is an awful place’ and it was,” says Mr. Donovan. Even just sitting around in the tents doing nothing required huge amounts of energy. When running, the athletes had to make sure to eat and drink every hour. Two motorised snow sledges would drive up and down the course filling up their water bottles, which they would have to shake every few minutes to keep from freezing. They carried gu bars, a type of liquid jelly, as food. Meanwhile, if you stopped running for more than a few moments, your sweat would form icicles inside your clothes.

But despite the harsh conditions, Mr. Donovan kept going.

Past the sastrugi – the wave-like formations of ice – and beyond the unnerving stretch of the race where

there always seemed to be a crunching sound 40 yards ahead, causing him to worry that he was about to disappear into the ice. He even took a wrong turn at one stage.

And finally, exactly eight hours and 52 minutes after he set off, he crossed the finish line. Still running, he knew he'd done it. The 100 miles a week plodding the streets of Galway had paid off. The first instalment of his seven ultra-marathon project had been completed.

Less than three years ago, Mr. Donovan and his two older brothers, Paul (the former world-class athlete) and Gerard, had done the Marathon des Sables, a 140-mile race over six days across the Sahara. "We did it in memory of our father who died in 1998," he says. The ultra-marathons are for his mother, who died in 2000. Next on his agenda is a 100-mile run in New Zealand in February, that's if the circulation returns to his toes on time. A race in Death Valley in California is planned for July, the Inca Trail Marathon in Peru for August, followed by a 100-mile run through the Himalayas in October. The final ultra-marathon will be a 35-mile run in his native Galway where, no doubt, his wife and childhood sweetheart, Caroline Carrick, will be there to cheer him on. After that, he says, it's on to his day job in earnest. He chats away about the work he's done for the Vintners' Federation, among others; about the software packages he writes for the US college market, including one that accompanies a textbook by Prof John Taylor, an economic adviser to President Bush.

But the photos of his expedition, by now strewn across the coffee table and floor, are far too distracting. Spectacular landscapes and dramatic clouds, the orange tents they lived in, the igloos, the brilliant sunlight and the whiteness, the haunting beauty of Antarctica.

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