Defying disabilities to the end of the earth

Group of Spanish athletes are first-ever disabled team to attempt to conquer South Pole

Eric Villalón (c) who is visually impaired, trains by pulling tires through the sand on the beaches of Barcelona with expedition mate Xavier Valbuena, who is a femoral amputee.

At the South Pole, water freezes in seconds. Antarctica has a higher average elevation than any other continent on Earth. The altitude, coupled with its extreme latitudes, produces an atmosphere so thin that the body must undergo a grieving adjustment to work on so little oxygen. Hypothermia is a constant fear and dangerous reality. Anything from eating and drinking to setting up a tent are activities that become painfully tedious. Any material allowed to get wet immediately becomes useless. Captain R. F. Scott, the second South Pole “conqueror” in history, who tragically perished alongside his team in 1912 on the homeward trip, famously declared: “Great God! This is an awful place.”

In spite of this, there are still adventure-seekers who dare to go there. Starting December 30, Expedición Polo Sur Sin Límites, or South Pole Without Limits, in conjunction with La Caixa as part of the Catalan savings bank’s Obra Social or outreach foundation, will send three novices, with two experienced guides, to travel to the Geographical South Pole with no outside assistance. Over three weeks, they will ski 250 kilometers, facing winds of over 300kph at -40ºC. Everything they need to survive, they will drag in sleds behind them.

On top of the obvious obstacles, the three first-timers will face their own personal challenge: Eric Villalón sees at only five percent capacity; Xavier Valbuena’s right leg was amputated eight years ago; and Jesús Noriega has been missing a hand since birth. Iria González-Dopeso, the substitute for the trip, is a tibial amputee.

If it seems like the group’s respective physical and sensory disabilities are an afterthought, it’s because they often give that impression. Although of course, they are very real. This is what will make the Catalan regional government-funded expedition historic, representing the first-ever attempt to reach the South Pole by a team of individuals with physical disabilities. Disability is also one of the ties binding them together. There are many goals spelled out in the project’s dossier, although perhaps the most important is to “show the abilities of the disabled.”

Though they have been training, mostly individually, for the past year-and-a-half, locked inside industrial freezers, dragging skis through the sand, working around the demands of their day jobs and families, it will be indispensable that the group works together. Teamwork is one of the mantras of the group. In a period of just over a year, Villalón, Valbuena and Noriega, along with the project director Montserrat García Martínez, and a few other individuals have gone from being a group of strangers, to close companions who check in on each other every day, and whose lives have become intensely intertwined around a single adventure.

Norway’s Roald Amundsen and his group were the first humans to set foot on the Geographical South Pole, in 1911, nipping out Scott and his team, who were crushed to find the Norwegian flag flapping in the wind a year later. In 1989, Arved Fuchs and Reinhold Messner became the first pair to reach the South Pole without animal or motorized help, using only skis and wind for propulsion. Still today, an unaided journey to our planet’s southernmost tip is hardly common place. While a successful expedition would put a notch in the record books for disabled athletes, it is also a feat undertaken by precious few fully capacitated adventurers.

In fact, the total number of people who have successfully completed such a route is thought to number only a few hundred.

With a mission statement that includes “inspiring young people all over the planet,” the team is not looking for sympathy. “Overprotection, other people’s pity and self-pity and the lack of willingness to become all we can become are the biggest disabilities we all face,” says Eric Villalón, one of the participants, who was born visually deficient and sees nothing with his right eye.

That is why, as another expedition member, Xavier Valbuena, explains, it can take almost three hours from the time you stop moving for the day, until you are finally ready for bed. Pitching a tent in the Arctic winds, chopping ice to heat and drink, and preparing...
Polar exploration

food to eat are all time-con-
suming. Valbuena is a high-school biol-
yoga teacher who lost his right leg in a motorcycle accident eight years ago. As opposed to the "elite athlete" Villalón, Valbuena de-
scribes himself as a normal guy, and perhaps not your run of the mill for the pick of the paddlers. "I wouldn't call it a "corporate job" but he is already a"corporate job" and he will not do anything else. Like Valbuena, he and Villalón have spent a good deal of time training together. His teammatedescribes the distance as being a "corporate job" but he is already a

‘someone that writes a book about them. They are the most amazing people I have met in my life. I have never seen so many people on the same wavelength at the same time. I’ve never seen people love each other so much.’

Separated from Catalans Villa-
lon and Garcia, only by distance, is Jesus Noriega, a Madrid native. Noriega, who was 26 years old without his right hand, shares certain character-
istics with both of his team-
mates. Like Valbuena, he attributes surprisingly little importance to his physical condition; like Val-
buena, the project has also in-
spired him in a new life view.

‘I’ve never really considered myself disabled,’ he explains. ‘I drive my car, my motorbike, I go to work each day and come home to my kids. I’ve never felt part of this group.’

Garcia explains that this project has given him a

new life. ‘She meets a group of special people, and this is a special project. Why not con-

vience to be able to teach disabled

in the world. “The Antarctic

ear low for three years. Montse García re-

and Villalón have spent a good deal of time training together. His team-

can actually survive in these ex-

organisms in certain places, we can

The goals of the team’s evi-
dence-gathering are two-fold. First CSC will study the samples to see "what type of life is capable of surviving in such a harsh cli-

Gili, also the deputy director of ICM, explains that having a

team willing to move slowly over hundreds of kilometers of such

The expedition team for Polo Sur Sin Limites will not set out only to survive the planet’s harshest

cross 20km of the polar plateau at an altitude of roughly

Polar exploration

The team’s final group training trip in Greenland in November, R. Madrid

The journey toward cracking the enigma of Antarctica’s diversity

We think we might find lots of microbiological diversity that can actually survive in these ex-
treme conditions. His team is beginning to show.

Gili also the deputy director of ICM, explains that having a