



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. / ZERO LÍMITES

Defying disabilities to the end of the earth

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

KELLY RAMUNDO, Madrid

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 grueling 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 Geographic South Pole with no outside assistance. Over three weeks, they will ski 250 kilometers, facing winds of over 300km/h at -40°C. 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

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Eric is partially sighted; Xavier lost a leg; Jesús was born with one hand

have become intensely intertwined around a single adventure.

Norway's Roald Amundsen and his group were the first humans to set foot on the Geographic 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 commonplace. 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 little more than shadows and colors. "In my family, I was just one more. I've never given much importance to the issue of seeing."

Villalón says he didn't hesitate when he got the call to join the project. "It's like if someone calls and they ask if you want to go to the moon. You say yes. You would never say no," he explains.

Extreme sports in frigid temperatures is nothing new for Villalón, who competed in three Paralympic Games between 1998 and 2006, winning nine medals for skiing. But what would be a lifetime's achievement for some is little more than a side-note for the Barcelona native, who is reluctant to mention the two gold medals he won for his country in 2002, much less that his extracurricular activities include skateboarding around Barcelona and teaching skiing to children on the weekends.

The expedition's director, Montse García, is a bit more forthcoming. "Eric is incredible," she explains. "When you ask him about his Olympic medals, he brushes it off. 'That's already done' is what he says."

Villalón is eager to talk about the upcoming mission. "These might all seem like silly things, but the smallest detail is important in the Antarctic — setting up your tent, using the bathroom, using a knife and fork. You get something wet in Antarctica and you lose it."

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, chipping ice to heat and drink, and preparing

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food to eat are all time-consuming.

Valbuena is a high-school biology teacher who lost his right leg in a motorcycle accident eight years ago. As opposed to the “elite athlete” Villalón, Valbuena describes himself as a conventional guy, and perhaps not your run of the mill pick for the expedition. “I would not have seen myself as skiing to the South Pole when I had both of my legs, let alone as a femoral amputee.”

At 44, he is also the oldest of the three competitors, and the only of the three who was not born with his disability, but had to adapt to the condition later in life. For Valbuena, above all, the expedition has allowed him to reassess his own notion about being disabled. “After I joined the expedition I discovered that I can do things. I can run, I can ride a bike. This project has given me complete and total freedom.” He says that since the three athletes were brought together for the mission, they have been in contact daily via email or phone, and he and Villalón have spent a good deal of time training together. His teammates give him the biggest morale boost.

“I feel completely and totally supported by them,” he explains, speaking after returning from the group’s last major training exercise, nine days in Greenland in mid-November.

There, the group was equipped for the first time with all the material they will take with them on December 30, and they addressed challenges such as pitching tents in sub-zero temperatures. Valbuena was also able to make sure that his uniquely designed prosthetic leg (engineered by innovator Josep Maria Camús, also known as *Xixu*) was able to withstand the extreme cold. “We had to develop it from zero, as there was no prosthesis for skiing before. Until Greenland, I had been training on the beach, so we were anxious to see what happened in sub-zero temperatures.”

Valbuena’s own personal story is also closely linked with that of García, the project’s most vocal supporter, and 20 years ago, his biology student. It was García that Valbuena was on route to see when he had his motorcycle accident. The two have remained close over decades, and García describes him as “the best teacher I’ve ever had.” She tells the story of how when Valbuena was in the hospital in a critical condition owing to internal injuries, he was frantically trying to get someone to call her to tell her he wouldn’t be making it for lunch. “That’s what he was worrying about. Can you believe that?”

Years later, García, who suffers from fibromyalgia, the “invisible disability” which causes chronic extreme physical pain, tells the story of how she eventually was able to help her former teacher see that with the help of a special prosthesis, he could take part in physical activities he had considered long lost after his accident.

“When Xavier called me about taking part in this project, I jumped on board right away. He knows I am famously stubborn and hard-working, and would never give up on this. And truthfully, this project has given me a

new life.” She says meeting this group has changed her enormously. “Someone should write 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 Villalón, Valbuena and García only by distance, is Jesús Noriega, a Madrid native. Noriega, who was born 36 years ago without his right hand, shares certain characteristics with both of his teammates. Like Villalón, he attributes surprisingly little importance to his physical condition; like Valbuena, the project has also inspired in him 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.’” Ironically, contact with the expedition team over the past year and a half is what Noriega says inspired in him a newfound pride in being disabled, not his actual condition.

“Eric is the first person I have had a relationship with who has a visual disability. It changes your way of thinking. Through these

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“After two years of this intense experience, what are we going to do next?”

guys, I have learned a different way of perceiving the world.” He says that when thinking about Polo Sin Límites’ platform, he thought, “Why not? We are a group of special people, and this is a special project. Why not convey this message to young people?”

Starting on December 30, the group, along with guide Ramón Larramendi — “one of the most prestigious polar explorers in the world,” says Noriega — and another pro-adventurer, Ignacio Oficialdegui, will travel from Spain to Punta Arenas in Chilean Patagonia. From there, they will fly to Antarctica’s Patriot Hills, the popular base camp for South Pole expeditions that lies at 80°S. The next day, they will take a small plane over the sparse “ice desert” to reach the starting point of their physical journey. January 6 to 27, roughly, will be spent trying to overpower fierce winds, traverse immense ice fields and glaciers for seven hours daily, hoping to cross 20km of the polar plateau per day. At an altitude of roughly 3,000 meters, combined with the extreme latitude, the levels of oxygen in the air are similar to the equivalent of being on a 4,500-meter mountain peak else-

where. Due to the conditions, after each hour of movement they must take a short break of five minutes — the worst part, according to Noriega — where they eat and drink. They must take in calories constantly, as so many are burned trying to keep warm. But it is during the pauses that they will really feel the cold.

Despite the challenges, no one in the group hints at anything resembling dread or inhibition. The group’s enthusiasm has also led them to plan tangential scientific and educational projects during the expedition and once back in Spain afterwards, in collaboration with La Caixa Foundation’s Environmental and Science Outreach Projects and Spain’s Higher Council of Scientific Research (CSIC). In the Antarctic, they will collect ice samples for future study at the Barcelona lab. Back at home, children will also make up a big part of the project. An array of Barcelona schools will have satellite telephone conversations with the adventurers each day. After they get back, they will bring their story to school children across Spain.

“There is a way of telling this story so it has an impact,” García explains. “If kids are taught to feel bad for people with disabilities, the little ones get sad and feel pity, and the older kids couldn’t care less. If you give them a story of science and adventure, you hook them. Then you say, look: he only sees five percent, or he’s missing a leg. From there, the logical step is for them to see that disabled people can do many things. We need more role models like this group.”

As departure day nears, Noriega is not alone in feeling a certain sense of premature deflation. “The expedition is important, but it’s just a part of it. We have been at it for a year-and-a-half.”

In mid-November, the group returned from training in Greenland on the day that happened to coincide with the eighth anniversary of Valbuena’s motorcycle accident. Montse García remembers receiving a message that brought tears to her eyes, something that happens “a lot” with this group, she says. From: Xavier: “It seems unreal, but who would have thought that eight years later I would be here,” it read.

What remains to be seen is where they will be next, as all admit that the “high” from the project is not something that is likely to wear off. Noriega currently holds what he describes as a “corporate job” but he is already questioning how easy it will be to go back to life as usual. “After two years of this intense experience, what are we going to do next? We will definitely do something. I don’t think you ever return the same.”

He explains that this project has sparked a desire to give others with disabilities the chance to have a similar experience. “I haven’t told anyone this yet, but I love scuba diving, and one idea I have is to get an instructor’s license to be able to teach disabled people how to dive.

“When you find something valuable in your life, things that give you more satisfaction, it truly renews your spirit. It gives you a bigger purpose.”

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The team’s final group training trip in Greenland in November. / R. NADAL

The journey toward cracking the enigma of Antarctica’s diversity

K. R., Madrid

The expedition team for Polo Sur Sin Límites will not only set out to survive the planet’s harshest climate, they will also double as scientists to help research the virtually unexplored Antarctic. Coordinating the project is renowned marine biologist Josep-Maria Gili, research professor at Barcelona’s Institute of Marine Sciences (ICM), which is part of Spain’s Higher Council of Scientific Research (CSIC).

Under the long-distance tutelage of Gili and using equipment provided by CSIC and other institutions like the Catalan Cartographic Institution (ICC), biologist Xavier Valbuena and the team will collect daily samples from the Antarctic ice, which will be preserved and eventually taken back by ship to Barcelona for microbiological and chemical analysis.

The goals of the team’s evidence-gathering are two-fold. First CSIC will study the samples to see “what type of life is capable of surviving in such a harsh climate,” says Gili. Secondly, researchers will analyze the organic elements of the ice and what may be contaminating it. Although Antarctica is known to be relatively pristine, Gili also believes that human contamination is beginning to show.

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

team willing to move slowly over hundreds of kilometers of such ruthless landscape presents a “unique opportunity” for the scientific community, which could very well end up being “one of the most important scientific contributions coming out of Spain at this level.” The samples collected there, he thinks, could be very telling, as no such thorough study has been performed to date. “Now we can actually observe what’s in the middle of the Antarctic plateau,” he explains.

“We think we might find lots of microbiological diversity that can actually survive in these extreme conditions.” His prediction is not unfounded. Gili has spent much of his career studying the region at the marine level, having traveled to Antarctica five times, spending a combined year-and-a-half studying the biological richness of its seas.

One of his passions has become investigating why, contrary to popular belief, Antarctica is one of the most biodiverse areas in the world. “The Antarctic ocean is like a coral reef,” he explains. “I think that through studying why there is so much biodiversity in certain places, we can study the origins of life on this planet.” He is just as enthusiastic when it comes to praising his volunteers: “I see in them an incredible ability to overcome obstacles many people are not capable of... It’s a privilege to be with them.”