

Everest — the ultimate pique

The latest team to tackle Mount Everest has faced a sponsorship storm, reports
Tara Turkington

AFTER months of struggling to obtain sponsorship, five mountaineers and a cameraman left for Tibet on Sunday August 16, in South Africa's second-ever attempt at scaling Mount Everest.

The battle for sponsorship followed the recent *Sunday Times*-sponsored expedition which saw bitter infighting between team members, rows over sponsorship and the death of team photographer, Bruce Herrod.

The *Sunday Times* expedition, led by Ian Woodall, is believed to have cost about R1.5-million, according to a well-placed mountaineering source.

However, the R220 000 budget for the latest team — Alex Harris (25), Anton Erasmus (27), Sean Disney (24), Robin Walshaw (25), Mark Campbell (26) and cameraman Sean Wisedale (30) — is minuscule in comparison.

"The cost of our entire expedition amounts to Ian Woodall's petty cash," said Harris, the team's leader.

"There's been a lot of negative feeling from potential sponsors," co-climber Walshaw explained.

Disney added: "Sponsorship has been damaged by the previous expedition ... I'm very bitter about it." He produced a file thick with rejections of sponsorship requests.

Sunday Times editor Brian Pottinger turned down sponsorship, as did Independent Newspapers' deputy chief executive Ivan Fallon, who "was fairly abusive on the phone", said Harris.

Fallon says he was not abusive, but "polite and firm. Anyway, it's absolute nonsense sponsoring people who have a dream of climbing



Lightweight team: 'The cost of our entire expedition amounts to Ian Woodall's petty cash'

PHOTOGRAPH: TARA TURKINGTON

Everest. They can go ahead and climb Everest if they want to, without my sponsorship," Fallon said.

More than half their budget was sponsored, some of it scraped together from friends and relatives. The rest they provided personally.

The expedition has been endorsed — and partially sponsored — by the Mountain Club of South Africa (MCSA), which distanced itself from Woodall's trip.

MCSA president Andre Schoon said the negative impact of Woodall's expedition "has been of great concern to the mountain club". However, he said the MCSA was "extremely happy" putting its weight behind Harris's team members, all of whom have considerable mountaineering experience.

Schoon said the tight budget would

"have a bearing on the expedition", and that they would have to cut back on assistance, such as yaks and porters in their assault on Everest from the North Ridge. He also said that "a lightweight expedition" such as this one was far more susceptible to bad weather than an expedition with more resources.

The North Ridge approach, from Tibet, is a technically more difficult and less popular route than the most commercialised South Col route from Nepal, taken by Woodall's team. Permits for the North Ridge approach are also considerably cheaper — \$5 500 for the group, as opposed to the \$70 000 the Nepalese government charges for a team tackling the South Col approach.

The climbers admitted last week that one of the reasons they'd chosen the North Ridge approach was

because it was cheaper, but also because they thought it was safer — if technically more difficult — with less crevasses than South Col.

The biggest sponsorship the team raised was R50 000 in cash from camping outfitters ME Stores. Managing director Warwick Stevens said although it was unusual for his company to provide sponsorships of this sort, "there needed to be a technical climbing team to go again to Everest," to re-establish credibility in South African mountaineering. "We were forced to be [the biggest sponsor]. If we didn't step in, they didn't go."

But Stevens conceded "R50 000 for that sort of expedition is not a lot of money ... As a sponsor's view, this was a bargain." He said that his company was interested in developing mountaineering in South Africa, not in high-profile publicity.

"Their prize is to have a successful expedition, not necessarily to reach the summit. I think the guys sold themselves a little bit short," and that with more work they could have raised another R100 000, although not much more. "I think the expectation of sponsorship is a little bit unreasonable. Sponsorship is a business decision, not a donation," Stevens said.

Keith Laing, financial director of CI Accessories, which sponsored the Harris trip tents and packs and gas appliances worth R21 000, sponsored the Woodall trip to a similar degree.

"We got nothing out of it [the Woodall trip], so we were actually quite cynical about this one," Laing said. "We've never yet seen a photograph of a Coleman stove on Everest, despite having sponsored it on the first one."

Laing said his company was promised photographs and an assessment of its products from Woodall's team, but had not received either. The *Sunday Times* "were in it as a marketing ploy", argued Laing.

But most companies not directly involved in mountaineering and which were approached by the team were sceptical of the trip as a meaningful and unifying drive for the country.

British Petroleum's public affairs liaison officer Peter Petersen said: "Expeditions such as these are looked upon as a luxury. It's a nice-to-do thing, but won't help us here at all."

Nedcor's assistant general manager Dr Ivan May said: "We can't do everything. We've just sponsored the Olympic team ... Mountaineering is not a priority."

Andy Hackland, who was a member of Woodall's team, but resigned along with co-climbers Ed February and Andy de Klerk in protest at Woodall's leadership style, said the team's lack of sponsorship could actually be an advantage in the long run.

"Small-scale is probably the better way to do it." Many mistakes are made in mountaineering, Hackland said, because climbers feel indebted to their sponsors and "push the boat too far".

The team has not only struggled with sponsorship but has also battled to obtain media coverage. The climbers left Johannesburg International Airport following a press conference that was attended more by family than the media. The climbers estimate the total coverage of their expedition thus far amounts to less than 15 newspaper articles, a few radio interviews and one television appearance.

When they return, they'll be leading a development initiative to take four climbers from disadvantaged communities up Mount Cho Oyu, the world's sixth-highest mountain, also in the Himalayas. They're hoping this trip — whether they reach the top or not — will persuade potential sponsors to drop their scepticism about mountaineering and put financial muscle behind developing the sport in South Africa.