

THRILLS AND SHILLS

Companies turn to professional adventurers as they search for ways to plug products

By ANN MONROE

BEFORE DARING to cross the Atlantic, a would-be long-distance swimmer approached Rolex Watch U.S.A. His big dream needed a big company's financial support.

Rolex loves adventurers in its advertisements. They could do wonders with a photo of the swimmer crawling ashore in Europe or Africa, a Rolex on his wrist. But then the company checked into the details: The man planned to swim in a cruise ship's pool as *the ship* crossed the Atlantic.

"It caused a great deal of mirth around here" but not a penny of support, says William H. Sullivan, advertising director for Rolex.

Such are the pitfalls for thrill-seekers and explorers seeking corporate sponsors. Though hundreds of companies spend millions of dollars in cash and equipment to back adventurers, they do so mostly to fulfill their own promotional and advertising needs. Rolex gives many daredevils its time—in the form of waterproof and adventure-proof watches—and sometimes even its money, but only if their projects "help our marketing," says Mr. Sullivan. And a transatlantic swimmer in a ship's pool wouldn't make good ad copy, even if he wore a watch on each wrist.

Still, the relationship between hard-nosed sponsors and those who dream those crazy dreams is usually more involved than a simple commercial quid pro quo. For one thing, explorers are risking their lives, offering the potential for public relations disasters. Dangerous projects currently seeking sponsors include the first round-the-world plane flight without refueling and the first hang-glide attempt off Mount Everest.

Paul B. MacCready, designer of the only bicycle-powered plane to cross the English Channel, knows about corporate squeamish-

ness. He jokes that he and co-workers suspected that Du Pont Co. put its logo on the plane with water-soluble paint—to disassociate itself if the plane sank halfway across.

Actually, though, Du Pont and other corporate sponsors often go to great lengths on behalf of explorers they back. While on a 28,000-mile canoe trip around North America, Verlen Kruger lost his canoe in a fierce winds off the Oregon coast. Du Pont offered a \$2,000 reward and the boat and paddle turned up.

The big chemical company's interest in exploration and adventure stems mainly from its desire to promote its high-tech, high-performance products. The company backed Mr. Kruger because he could publicize the suitability of Kevlar, a fiber used in boat building, while he and a partner paddled down both coasts of North America and up the Mississippi River.

Unlike sports heroes who may eat Wheaties only because they're on contract, Mr. Kruger was already using a lot of Du Pont materials, which delighted the company. "I found out he was using Kevlar for the

right reasons and selecting the right resins, and he bought his own Cordura fabric and was using Holoofil products," recalls Hugh James, then Du Pont's marketing development representative for marine products.

Du Pont also sponsored the Gossamer Albatross—Mr. MacCready's plane—partly because "it was possible to build the airplane almost entirely with Du Pont materials," says Richard J. Woodward, the public relations official who worked on the project. "We were seeking to showcase our engineering and other materials."

Explorers have come to expect, and often resent, the inconvenience of fulfilling a sponsor's need for copy and photos. But Sir Ranulph Fiennes, described by a former Explorer's Club president as "the world's expert" in raising corporate money, is more tolerant of sponsors' demands. "I have always understood that sponsors must get their pound of flesh," says Sir



Christopher Bing

Ranulph. "Otherwise they won't help."

Sir Ranulph rounded up 1,800 sponsors for his Trans-Globe Expedition, a three-year voyage around the world from north to south. Even before his quest began in 1979, he had devised a rule for all his adventures: Never spend any of your own money.

His thriftiness, however, put him at the mercy of his sponsors. Setting up compelling backgrounds for photographs of sponsors' products—crucial to sponsor satisfaction—gave his team's expedition "a slightly forced aspect," he says. Once, while rushing through a jungle to beat oncoming rains, his explorers had to make a four-day detour to reach a suitably wild and scenic area for photographs.

"You need to think in advance and make sure all the props are there," he says. Efficiency can be crucial, especially when taking photos for an underwear products ad at 40 degrees below zero. "You don't want the model (an expedition member) to get frostbite," he adds.

Meanwhile, Mr. Kruger learned to improve his fund-raising record by teaming up with Valerie Fons, now his fiancée. She approaches the task of the cou-

ple's next mission—a two-year, 17,000-mile journey from the Arctic Circle to Buenos Aires—as a saleswoman might. Saying that expedition sponsorship is "an underutilized area for corporations," she will solicit support from anyone, including President Reagan. (She got back a letter from the State Department offering help, but no money.)

Sometimes, companies become sponsors by accident. Marsh & McLennan Cos. had to accept a role in the Trans-Globe Expedition when it bought C.T. Bowring & Co., a British insurance broker and major expedition sponsor. "All we knew," recalls Bruce Schnitzer, then the chief financial officer, "was that this guy called Sir Ranulph Twistleton-Wykenham Fiennes was a professional explorer and was going around the world for the honor of the Queen."

Bewildered by the oddball adventure, Marsh & McLennan could have kept Bowring's financial commitment without getting too involved. But instead, the insurance company became enthusiastic and promoted its role. With co-sponsor Mobil Corp., it underwrote a television show about the trip, featuring Britain's Prince Charles, an expedition patron, as narrator.

The company also hosted corporate affairs wherever Sir Ranulph's group hit land. "One way to get value is to use it for our own employees," says Mr. Schnitzer.

Companies say they must be wary, however, before getting involved in some adventures. PDC Labs Inc., an El Segundo, Calif.-based maker of marine solar panels, gets requests for help from "every kook who wants to do something crazy," says Paul Dennis, the company's president. One request the company turned down: a solar panel for an ocean-going windsurfer.

But when Mr. Dennis heard from Curt and Kathleen Seville, a young couple planning to row across the Atlantic, he was impressed. "I look for the fact that I think they're going to survive," he says. "They looked like they were doing a good, sensible job."

PDC Labs supports only projects that have a recognizable return. Still, Mr. Dennis finds a vicarious thrill in his involvement. "I'm a sailor myself in a small cruising way," he says, "and I enjoy the contact with these people."

Adventurers, however, find some dangers in well-meaning sponsorship. The Sevilles learned the hazards of getting free equipment after a company offered to donate oarlocks. "Suddenly they got cold feet and said they didn't think the oarlocks were going to hold up," Mr. Seville says. After checking the equipment, it turned out the company was right. He adds: "It was a real eye-opener." Since then, he has been more careful before accepting freebies.

The Sevilles, who crossed the Atlantic in 1981, recently completed a 392-day trip across the Pacific in a 25-foot rowboat with two tiny cabins. They kept their sponsors personally involved in their journey by sending postcards or letters from each stop. It was their way of showing appreciation.

And last winter, corporate sponsorship may have outdone itself: The Seville's first junior adventurer was born, conceived on the high seas. ■