

emotions as we celebrated with joy his historic achievement, and now must try to come to terms with the untimely loss of a great

loving son. He had a great love of traditional Irish music, and despite living away from Limerick for the past number of years he

ad information we received from Maarteen – the web master for Norit expedition. "Thanks also to Pat

be returning home. "We will not be making any more statements at this sad time and thank you for your co-operation."

lands of Limerick, but he fell in love with mountains. And the stories are told that when he was on the expeditions that were his life's work, he sang Irish songs.

He brought his bodhran. On one famous occasion in 2003, when he scaled Everest, he even brought a caman and sliothar.

The story is told too that, on these trips, he would worry about his mother, Gertie, at home in Kilcormán, worry that reports would get back to her that might in turn set her worrying.

Ger was first and foremost a professional mountaineer, but he was also a computer engineer who worked with an oil company in Alaska, his adopted home for the past

"He was a gem," friend and fellow musician Richard Gelardin said in Anchorage at the weekend. "Very funny. He was a philosopher, a great storyteller, and just a wonderful, warm, kind, loving person."

"He loved to have the craic, as we'd say in Ireland," fellow band member John Walsh said.

Ger's whole-hearted embracing of life was also noted by friend and fellow mountaineer, Pat Falvey.

"On all his expeditions, Ger was known as the life and soul of every trip, renowned for his unlimited energy and legendary wit," he said in a tribute earlier this week.

"Ger's family can console themselves with the fact that Ger lived his life

the mountain and in an attempt to separate fact from rumour, "decided to clear this up by asking direct witnesses exactly

"He was more interested in the sciences than in languages," she said.

Ger, she added, was keen on sport and was a "good enough hurler".

But it was climbing that interested him.

"He had a fascination with climbing," Mrs Hawkes said, adding that Ger, along with his friend, John Hanley, joined a climbing club while still at school.

With this first, small step began a long journey of mountaineering achievement which ended with Ger's tragic death last weekend.

he erected memorials to some of the fallen climbers, including Mr McDonnell, at the Gilkey Memorial on the mountain itself.

Happier times: after Everest



Gerard received a hero's welcome in his native Kilcormán after climbing Mount Everest in 2006

Girlfriend Annie was first to hear of historic feat

Norma Prendiville

WHEN Ger McDonnell made history early on Friday morning by becoming the first Irish person ever to scale K2, reports say he rang his long-time girlfriend in Anchorage, Alaska, Annie Starkey.

We don't know yet whether he managed to beat the bodhran on the top of the peak known as the killer mountain. He was known to have done it before on Alaska's highest peak, Mt McKinley – just as when he reached the top of Everest in 2003, he

belted a sliothar into the rarified air of the Himalayas, the roof of the world.

The climbers, which included Ger's Dutch-led Norit 2 expedition, then began the even more treacherous journey – the descent. Just under 1,500 metres from the top of the world's second highest mountain, a fall of ice occurred.

This cut through the fixed ropes of an 8,000 to 9,000 metre drop known as the Bottleneck or the Death Zone.

Without the fixed ropes,

the descent was treacherous, if not impossible.

Before the fall of ice, at least some had made it down to safety. When the ice fell, a number were flung to certain death. More were trapped above the Bottleneck.

Two of these managed to make it down to camp, possibly by a different route. Another five were seen trying to navigate the icy, treacherous gully.

At least one of those who had earlier made it to safety, a Sherpa, returned to help. But, according to the Everestnews.com web-

site, when he caught up with a friend, they slipped and died.

A later report says that those spotted on the Bottleneck could no longer be seen. Figures for those dead and those missing varied.

In the volatile, hazardous conditions of K2, rescue attempts were difficult. Helicopters could not fly above 19,000 feet because of the rarified air. For those caught in Death Zone, the chances of survival were put at one per cent. By early Sunday, even that tiny chance had

slipped away. Ger was recorded as missing, status unknown.

But his family knew and bravely, they told the world of their pride in Ger even as they sought to come to terms with their grief.

Since the initial reports, many statements have been made by members of the expedition, by other mountaineers, leading to claim, counter-claim and confusion. Ger's family must hope that the investigation into the world's worst mountaineering disaster will clear up some of the contradictions.

Falvey urges people to 'ignore' stories

Alan Owens

THE man acting as a spokesperson for the McDonnell family has appealed for reports emanating from Pakistan to be "ignored" until an official report is compiled.

Adventurer Pat Falvey, friend and fellow climber of Kilcormán's Gerard McDonnell, spoke to the Limerick Leader in advance of his trip to Pakistan this Saturday with members of Mr McDonnell's family.

Mr Falvey will be accompanied by Mr McDonnell's partner, Annie Starkey, his brother, JJ, and Karen Connell in a bid to ascertain with more clarity the events that led to the Limerick climber's death.

They hope to meet team leader Wilco van Rooijen, who is being treated for frostbite in a Pakistan hospital having survived the

incident that saw 11 climbers die after a successful summit of the world's most dangerous mountain.

Mr Falvey explained his belief that Mr van Rooijen was "misquoted" when suggesting advance climbers may have put ropes in an incorrect position.

He rejected the claims of another climber, Swede Fredrik Strang, who suggested the climbers were not experienced enough to complete the task.

"We have been on to base camp and some of Wilco's quotes have been misquoted," explained Mr Falvey, who climbed on four different expeditions with Mr McDonnell.

"Basically they are tying it in with this Swedish climber, but the statement at the moment is that all (surviving) climbers are getting together, there will

be a timeline of events and we are hoping that when we get to Islamabad that there will be a proper and official report.

"Statements that are coming out at the moment should be ignored until a full official report comes out in relation to what happened in the accident, we believe an official statement should be made within the next week or so," he said.

Mr Falvey rejected suggestions that the climbers may have been taken over by "summit fever", describing Mr McDonnell and the team as some of "some of the strongest minded individuals in the world, as well as some of the top professional climbers in the world."

"These people were not people who would have had summit fever. They did it because they loved doing it, and it wouldn't have

made a difference to them if they decided to go out and fight another day. They were professional climbers. They would not have gone into something they didn't think their capabilities would match or if the conditions were not right. Ger was the safest climber I would have known. He would not have been taken by summit fever. He loved life too much," he said.

Mr Falvey stressed the serac – an ice avalanche – which ploughed through the area known as the "bottleneck" that the men were descending, was responsible for the accident and that it was a "complete fluke of nature".

"That caused the accident, which in turn could have happened at any time. It didn't matter what time of the day or year it happened, it would have created the same conse-

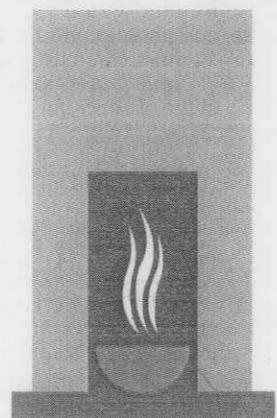
quences. And no matter where the lines had been put in as well, it took out the whole bottleneck, and would have cleaned the ropes from the bottleneck no matter where they were positioned," he said.

Mr Falvey said that Mr McDonnell, who lived in Alaska for the last 10 years with the intent of preparing for expeditions such as the one he will never return from, was driven by "a love of high places".

"Ger was a professional mountaineer and it is like winning a gold medal to get the top of any of the big mountains. So he would have been driven by his love for the mountains and high places as well as a love for travel and meeting new people," he said.

Mr Falvey added that a book of condolences for Gerard and his family has been opened on his website www.patfalvey.com

FSG
CENTRE



FIREPLACE | STOVE | GAS

At the hearth
of your home
for over
a decade

VISIT
OUR AWARD
WINNING
SHOWROOMS

MASSIVE
SUMMER
CLEARANCE

SALE
NOW ON
UNBELIEVABLE VALUE!

Tailor made
specialists for
designer sofas
in the Mid West

The Sofa Centre
@FSG

t: 065 6844562

Quin Rd Business Park, Ennis t: 065 6823991 www.midwestfsg.ie

Not far for Gerard to travel to the heavens above



Seen & Heard

ALAN OWENS

THIS week's column was meant to be a joyful celebration of the incredible achievement of a local man in reaching the top of the world's most dangerous mountain.

Instead, as I write, of the 17 people that stood on the summit of K2 – the second highest mountain in the world – 11 are feared dead, among them Kilcormac's Gerard McDonnell and this has become a heavy-hearted tribute to the man.

With mountaineering, and particularly an expedition like this, there are no certainties. Still, the family of the 37-year-old Limerick man have accepted that he will not be coming home from the Karakorum mountain range that he set out to conquer several months ago.

Most of the information about what is now the worst set of fatalities to occur on the notoriously "savage mountain" has fil-

tered out, at least to the Irish media, through the internet and from Ger's friend and fellow Irish climber, Pat Falvey.

While the family of the Kilcormac native understandably released an impassioned statement through a brother-in-law of McDonnell's, Falvey did his best to relieve some of the stress on them by acting as a sort of spokesperson, describing his late friend and attempting to shed some light on what kind of a man Ger was, as well as discussing his motivation in climbing a mountain that almost one in four people do not return from.

In an interview on Monday's Right Hook (Newstalk), Falvey discussed the incident with George Hook's stand-in Ivan Yates, former TD and now a bookmaker.

Pat, audibly emotional, discussed how he and Ger had met and gave the listeners some background of his friend, who he described as the life and soul of the party,

no matter what the occasion, as well as the most loyal team-player he had met, a fact he said he noticed about Ger immediately. He explained that he would not have been there but for the bravery and strength of Ger, who had helped him down Mount Everest in 2003.

Unfortunately, in Yates he was paired with a rather heavy-handed and breathy interviewer. While the interview was absorbing, that fact strongly rested on Falvey's recollections and contributions rather than Yates style of questioning, which was poor.

The former TD finished the interview by asking rhetorically if Falvey thought the practice of climbing mountains a reckless one. This, to a man who was nearly killed while attempting, successfully, to climb Everest, and who had just lost two of his close friends and climbing companions in this freak accident.

In fairness to Falvey he kept his composure and rationally explained that the motivation to do something like this is a mixture of a deep-rooted love of nature and the feeling that being at 8,611 metres above sea-level can feel like one step away from heaven.

We may never know what Ger's motivation was, but it is safe to say he would have been aware of the risks before he set foot on the mountain. The man famously

pucked a sliotar from the top of Everest, carried a tricolour on all his climbs and was known to play the Bodhran once he reached the summit – all evidence of the satisfaction he took in achieving something many would consider impossible.

While Falvey did his best to shelter the family from an intrusive media, a lot of news filtered through from the internet, with a number of sites, including the official one for the expedition being closed down due to the incredible traffic visting it. This is indicative of a changing media, with news moving too fast for current print and broadcast practices.

At the time of writing, Ger's personal dispatches are still available to read on the internet, and offer a fascinating, and heartbreaking, insight into the journey Ger and the team made up the mountain. It is a tale of long periods of waiting, of lows and highs as weather fronts constantly hampered summit plans, but at all times Ger remained jocular and upbeat and his enthusiasm shone through.

On Friday he became the first Irish person to summit K2, an incredible achievement. While he will never return, perhaps some consolation can be gained from the fact that he will be remembered forever for this feat and he would not have had far to travel from the top of K2 to the heavens above.



Gerard's enthusiasm and good humour shone through his internet dispatches

Tycho paved the way for Kepler and modern astronomy
Starscape



Glorious twelfth no more than a memory



Fear Tuaithe

TOM BROWNE

NEXT Tuesday, August 12, was traditionally the opening day of the

grouse shooting season known as the glorious twelfth but is now just a

nostalgic memory for the

In some places they have even been wiped out entirely. What a terrible disaster to a great sporting occasion.

Whether it was for a turf cutting day's work or just a stroll on the purple, heathered moor, the sight

scene above the tranquil bog land.

More exciting still was to see an Irish red setter stiffen on point after first whiffing the scent of the birds, with its companion pointer backing, motionless on a nearby hillside. What splendid memories.

Locally the man credited with the best August 12 bag of grouse is octogenarian and renowned herbalist Tim Daly out Blackwater/Meelick way. When Tim recalled for me some years ago his record day on the Woodcock Hill, Cratloe, Winding Gap Hills his bag was about 25 birds on that day during the emergency.

On all the mountains of

spread of forestry; the destruction of heather; the huge rise in the number of predator species, both birds and mammals and oddly the increase in transport (sportsmen get to the mountains more frequently nowadays) all contributed to the decline.

The forestry has swallowed up thousands and thousands of acres of natural grouse habitat. Fresh young heather shoots are the grouse's main diet. They need the old heather for covering their nesting grounds and young heather along with mountain berries for their diet.

Conifer type forests provide a healthy home for predators: on the ground

sibility of renting a grouse moor with the sole purpose of stocking it up with grouse. There would be no shooting allowed on this mountain; the birds would be used solely for setter and pointer field trials. This could all lead, of course, to more grouse eventually nesting on the

There was an old saying that the older birds had to be shot so that young birds could produce a new crop. This was

away the chicks in the nest or make the eggs infertile.

Even in Scotland where the moors get the same care as a well manicured suburban lawn, rain and cold weather in March, April and May can have devastating effects. And finally disease to which grouse are prone is an ever constant danger.

In years gone by, when it was necessary for hill farmers to burn the heather in spring to ensure a fresh crop of grass for cattle, it was a task carried out with sensitivity.

The stalks of the burned out heather provided cover for the nesting birds and the young shoots a fresh crop for feeding

would not disclose their location.

"We want these birds to survive. It's the only way we will save this great species," he begged.

I was more than happy to oblige.

Our grouse, which are a different species than the birds in Wales and Scotland are very special. An outright ban should be imposed on any further shooting if there is to be any hope of them surviving. There was an old saying that the older birds had to be shot so that young birds could produce a new crop. This was ridiculous and never more than now.

The grouse is a sturdy, attention bird with a