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Get Out Your Boards: Extreme Ironing May Soon Be Hot

By PAM BELLUCK

BOSTON, May 20 - Clawing up ice-crusted, razor-sharp mountain peaks can get a little boring. And dangling upside down from a bungee cord over jagged cliffs is, face it, rather ho-hum.

But now there's a way to add excitement, a dash of danger, the adrenaline-rush of risk: Take along an ironing board, a sturdy steam iron and a load of wrinkled shirts.

It's not for the faint of heart, to be sure. But extreme ironing - the marriage of activities like cliff jumping and kayaking treacherous rapids with what participants call "the satisfaction of a well-pressed shirt" - has been catching on.

The sport was born seven years ago when a young man named Phil Shaw came home from his job at a knitwear factory in Leicester, England, and found himself face to face with a mountain of creased laundry. Thinking that he would rather be rock climbing, Mr. Shaw took his ironing board out to his garden, attached his iron to a long extension cord and pressed his pants.

After that, he and his roommate, Paul Cartwright, did "a spot of ironing whilst rock climbing," Mr. Shaw said, while skiing the French Alps and after scrambling to the tops of tall trees in the Black Forest of Germany.

Now, countless handkerchiefs and pillow cases later, and after stretching to the corners of South Africa, Japan, Croatia and Chile, extreme ironing is coming to the United States, hoping to appeal to the spin-cycle superhero, the wash-and-wear wonder woman in all of us.

This week, Mr. Shaw and two fellow "ironists" made their first stateside stop, in Massachusetts. They ironed while kayaking in the Atlantic Ocean, while climbing in a Rockport rock quarry, and, in Boston, while hanging off the side of a World War II amphibious vehicle known as a duck boat.

"From a British person's point of view you've never made it unless you've made it in America," explained Mr. Shaw, as he practiced "urban extreme ironing" atop an ironing board pyramid in front of a Boston landmark, Faneuil Hall.

There are about 1,500 ironists worldwide, Mr. Shaw said. Some teams have corporate backers; Rowenta, the German iron maker, is sponsoring the trip of Mr. Shaw's team to the United States.

"Our aim is to have the level of recognition that it becomes an Olympic sport," he said. "If you can have synchronized swimming and curling, I think extreme ironing has as much to offer."

It would be the first Olympic sport in which the athletes did not use their real names. "In order to avoid the ridicule of our peers," Mr. Shaw and his compadres adopt pseudonyms, he wrote in a how-to book, "Extreme Ironing." Mr. Shaw is Steam. Others are Cool Silk, Iron Mike, Fe (the chemical symbol for iron), Jeremy Irons and Iron Lung.

The first Extreme Ironing World Championship was held in Germany in 2002 and was judged by a white-gloved panel of German homemakers. (A second world championship could come soon, depending on sponsorship negotiations.) Eighty teams from 10 countries competed on an obstacle course arrayed in the shape of an iron, pressing boxer shorts and blouses while scaling a climbing wall, hanging from a moss-covered tree branch and squeezing under the hood of a car.

The actual ironing counts. "Ironists," Mr. Shaw wrote in his book, "are sometimes so absorbed in getting themselves into some sort of awkward or dangerous situation with their ironing board that they forget the main reason they are there in the first place: to rid their clothing of creases and wrinkles." The quality of the pressing counts for 60 of 120 points. Style counts for 40 points and speed 20.

Mr. Shaw's team took a gold medal, as did a German contestant, Hot Pants, who won a trip to Hawaii. "She really took care on her collars and cuffs," said Short Fuse, a.k.a. Penny Wilkerson, who is on the American tour along with Starch

(Matthew Patrick) and Steam.

No iron is right for every situation. A "one-iron," the heaviest, is, Mr. Shaw wrote, "excellent for those stubborn creases and strenuous situations involving high winds, but too heavy and awkward for long-distance ironing."

Sometimes the ironists lug electrical generators, but other times they heat their irons on portable gas stoves. A German ironist, Dr. Iron Q, has treated an iron with a chemical that heats up when water is applied.

While shirts have been pressed from Everest to the Brazilian rain forest, on bicycles and trampolines and in caves, Mr. Shaw, now a computer consultant, has hopes of a "seven wonders of the world" ironing extravaganza. To that end, his crew will iron on Mount Rushmore next week, after ironing stops among alligators and bison.

On Memorial Day, they will iron in a cherry picker at 44th and Broadway in Times Square. (At the moment, the Flatiron Building is not on their itinerary.)

Urban ironing might seem less challenging, its difficulty lying "in the extreme embarrassment of ironing on a street in front of large crowds," Mr. Shaw wrote. Indeed, in Boston, Linda Lukas, a marketing director, was practically derisive of Steam and Starch cantilevered off the duck boat, pressing a yellow oxford shirt.

"Are those guys ironing?" Ms. Lukas said. "I don't get it."

But Mr. Shaw said urban ironing can be just as physically demanding. And it aids his whole ironing ethos by "bringing people together," he said.

"My mum taught me ironing when I was a boy," he said, misting slightly. "She would iron everything: tea towels, dressing gowns, socks. There must be something to it."