



HIMALAYAS

MOUNTAIN ZEBRA

Former NHL referee Mike Leggo made the trek to northern India to help oversee the world-record attempt at high-altitude hockey.

dation, which organized the event, had taken every precaution possible – a doctor travelled with us, a defibrillator was on hand, there were oxygen tanks to help us get through

the games and we had an emergency beacon to alert the Indian army in case someone had to be flown out to a hospital – but, really, we were on our own.

China to the east. In Leh, everyone had acclimatized for at least three days to a more comfortable elevation of 11,500 feet. Of the 100 or so players in the six-team tournament, many were taking Diamox, a prescription drug used to prevent Acute Mountain Sickness, though there was also a large contingent of Darwin Award nominees who self-medicated with liberal doses of alcohol.

At just 7,000 feet above sea level, AMS – of which symptoms include headaches, nau-

Most Guinness World Records range from the ridiculous to the absurd: the world's largest coconut orchestra (5,567), most toilet seats broken by the head in one minute (46), fastest 100 meters on a skateboard by a dog (19.65 seconds), most watermelons sliced open on someone's stomach in one minute (49), greatest distance moonwalked in one hour (3.54 miles), most candles extinguished by a fart (five).

By comparison, “the highest altitude hockey game ever played” sounds almost mundane, even boring. At times, however, attempting the record felt no less crazy.

That was especially true on the ride from Leh to our homestays for the tournament. The drive took us on switchbacks right along the precipitous edge of the Himalayas, with nothing between our caravan of taxis and the worst rollercoaster ride ever. About halfway there, in the valley below, we came across the wreckage of three obliterated army trucks (or was it one in three pieces?), the innards gutted like those of a slaughtered cow. Judging by the profusion of road signs, India's Ministry of Transportation had opted to encourage safe driving on this precarious mountain road with goofy gallows humor: “Speed is a knife that cuts life,” “You are not being chased,” “Speed thrills but kills” and “Life is a journey. Complete it!” It must not have occurred to the

At over 14,300 feet, the rink was nearly three miles above sea level, the equivalent of roughly halfway up Mount Everest. Playing hockey at such an altitude is a war between the body and the mind. For the first 20 to 30 seconds of a shift, you feel fine. Then your body begins to ignore messages sent by your brain. You try to push through it, but eventually your legs start to seize up and your lungs begin to scream. All of a sudden, your body decides to block all messages entirely, as if your brain were some sort of obnoxious Twitter troll. From the bench, you could see the moment when players' bodies would tell their brains, “I'm not listening to you anymore.” Click. Block.

The altitude had already felled a few players back in Leh, the capital of Ladakh, a region in the heavily militarized northern state of Jammu and Kashmir, which is sandwiched between Pakistan to the west and

sea, vomiting, shortness of breath, loss of appetite and flu-like malaise – is common. With every 1,000 feet of higher elevation, the risk increases, and if untreated, it can deteriorate into High Altitude Pulmonary Edema, a condition in which fluid accumulates

WHAT I WAS SMELLING AND BREATHING WHILE I WAS GASPING FOR AIR WAS, IN FACT, YAK DUNG...THAT DIDN'T MAKE ME FEEL ANY BETTER – Adrian Mizzi, ‘The Travelling Goalie’

in the lungs. In extreme cases, it can be fatal.

We all knew the risks. We were playing hockey in the Himalayas on the Changthang Plateau, known as the ‘Roof of the World.’ It's one of the remotest and highest inhabited places on the planet. The Hockey Foun-

bureaucrats that the money would've been better spent on, oh, I don't know, maybe some bloody guardrails.

The three-hour drive was followed by three days of bare-bones accommodations stripped down to the marrow in a tiny town

If you want to get into the Guinness World Records for skating in the highest hockey game ever played, you head to the **Himalayas** and keep climbing until you find a one-of-a-kind rink and about 100 like-minded puck-chasing adventure seekers **BY RONNIE SHUKER**

THE DRY MOUNTAIN air was already bone-chilling cold when the wind whipped up before the start of the second period. I was still riding high after scoring the first goal of the record-setting game, albeit a garbage goal that a two-year-old tyke could've tapped in. At center ice, grinning widely underneath his black balaclava, was recently retired referee Mike Leggo, YouTube famous for once telling a penalized Shawn Horcoff

“You can't do that!” over his microphone. Only nine months earlier, Leggo had been living the high life in the NHL, officiating the best players on the planet. And yet here he was, on a jury-rigged rink on a remote floodplain in northern India near the Tibetan border, gleefully refereeing a bunch of beer-leaguers from all over the world. The smile on his face seemed to say, “It doesn't get much better than this, does it?”

There, surrounding us on all sides like the walls of an empty open-air stadium, were the Himalayas – brown and barren yet beautifully brutal in the treeless landscape. In

the distance, yak grazed on what little they could find in the harsh winter climate, dropping road apples, which the locals burn for heat, as they ate. Scattered along the base of the mountains were people from four nearby villages, watching intently as we attempted to make some obscure hockey history.

My teammates and I, representing The Hockey Foundation, had all managed to get through the first period just fine, as did our opponents on Team Ladakh, made up mostly of players from the Indian men's national team. But as the second period wore on, the thin air began to take its toll.

OPENER: COREY ADAMS

LEGGO: BRYAN LIPTZIN



IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME

To be eligible for the world record, the game had to take place at least 4,000 meters above sea level on a regulation-sized rink.

called Tangste, about 20 miles from the site of the rink. Tangste had no heat or running water and received only a few hours of electricity every day. Inevitable gastral emergencies, courtesy of India's mouthwatering yet bowel-blasting fare, had to take place outside over a dirt hole in frigid February temperatures as the cold winter wind blew up our bare behinds. Nights were spent mummified in our sleeping bags, warmed only by the generous hospitality of the locals, who'd graciously given everything of what little they had to make us feel welcome. "For 21 years, I lived in the Matrix," Leggo said. "I flew first class, I stayed in five-star hotels and ate at five-star restaurants where everything was, 'Yes, sir. What can I do for you, sir?'" This experience has been truly humbling."

This isn't the India you think you know – hot, humid, congested, polluted and cricket-crazy. Ladakh smashes every stereotype of India. It is desert-dry, sparsely populated, Canada-cold in the winter – and here hockey rules the roost.

Few know that India has a rabid hockey culture, though it is limited to the very north of the country. In the early 1970s, a battalion from the Indian army took up the game on the frozen streams and high-altitude lakes of the Changthang Plateau. With limited access to equipment, many of the players had to nail blades to the bottom of their army boots to make skates and carve rubber boot heels for pucks. The game slowly grew in popularity, and eventually exhibition matches were played in Leh. Canadian diplomats in India got wind that there was hockey in Ladakh and started playing friendlies against the locals, which morphed into the annual Indo-Canadian Friendship Cup.

Since 2009, The Hockey Foundation has been volunteering in Ladakh every winter. Two years ago, the New York-based charity came up with the idea of attempting the Guinness World Record as a way to draw attention to hockey in the region. More importantly, finding a set of boards to help finish a



half-built arena in Leh would finally give the hockey-mad Ladakhis a real rink to play in.

Bringing the idea to fruition was no small undertaking. Guinness stipulated 14 requirements that The Hockey Foundation had to meet to set the record. Among them, the game had to take place at an altitude over 4,000 meters on a regulation-sized rink under rules from either the IIHF or the NHL. That meant we had to play three 20-minute periods of stop time in full equipment at an altitude nearly two miles higher than where the Colorado Avalanche play. Leggo and an Austrian official from the IIHF fulfilled the requirement for certified referees, while

four witnesses had to watch and two cameras had to film the game for verification.

But by far the biggest requirement was building the rink. The Hockey Foundation bought a set of used Olympic-sized boards from Austria and had them shipped to India months in advance of the Guinness game, which opened the tournament. Less than a week before it was set to start, however, the boards were still stuck in the country's protracted bureaucracy. The foundation's partners in Ladakh had to escalate a petition all the way up to India's minister of defense, who signed off on using a Russian-made IL-76 military cargo plane to airlift the boards to Leh (just imagine U.S. secretary of defense

James Mattis ordering a B-52 bomber to fly in equipment for a recreational cricket game in Alaska). By the time the boards were trucked through the Himalayas to the site of the rink, volunteers had to compress a three-week job into just five days. "I've been

coming here enough years to know that it never works out the way you planned, but it always seems to get done in the end," said Adam Sherlip, executive director of The Hockey Foundation and former coach of the Indian men's national team. "I've been through this so many times before that when I got word that the boards actually arrived my reaction was just, 'Uh, OK. Welcome to India.'"

By the end of the second period, Team Ladakh had tied the game 1-1. A minor sandstorm kicked up as the players congregated at their respective benches to empty the oxygen tanks. One was set aside for our netminder, Adrian Mizzi, a.k.a. "The Travelling Goalie," who has played hockey in

TOP+SHUKER2: BRYAN LIPTZIN; SHUKER1: COREY ADAMS

TOP: COREY ADAMS; BOTTOM: BRYAN LIPTZIN



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—Adam Sherlip, executive director of The Hockey Foundation & India's former national coach

nearly 40 countries around the world. Not only did he need to replenish his depleted oxygen stores, he also needed to clean out his lungs after inhaling a strange smell that had been wafting in from the north. "In the second period, I had the wind in my face and I was breathing what I thought was diesel," Mizzi said. "I was told during the second intermission that what I was smelling and breathing in while I was gasping for air was, in fact, yak dung, which was being burned with kerosene. That didn't make me feel any better. I almost would've rather known it was diesel."

Early in the third period, Montana-resident Pete Kamman tipped in a shot from the point to give us the lead. A flurry of goals followed and a rejuvenated Mizzi repeatedly turned away the younger, faster Ladakhis (including stopping a penalty shot), allowing only one more goal. We finished the game with a 6-2 win.

After all the post-game photos, hugs and handshakes, I skated off to the dressing room, which was just an empty unheated army tent set up over the ice at the edge of the floodplain. I couldn't feel my feet at all and my frozen fingers struggled to unlace my skates. I gave up, slumped back into the red plastic lawn chair and got lost in thought. It

ELEVATION JUBILATION

It was cold, windy and hard to breathe, but when you're going for hockey glory in the Himalayas, what else would you expect?

was then that it dawned on me that I was the first person to score a goal in an organized hockey game over 14,000 feet.

I eventually got dressed and went out to watch the next game. Among the players was one of our Ladakhi translators. The day before he'd told me his dream was to play for the Indian men's national team. I watched as he took a puck to the mouth. After the game, filled with pride, he showed off the stitches in his upper lip. It was the unmistakable, cross-cultural smile of a hockey player: Don Cherry would've been proud.



HIMALAYAS

HOCKEY DAY IN INDIA

Residents from four nearby villages came out to watch the action. Cricket is the No. 1 sport in India, but hockey rules the far north.