



ZEN & THE ART OF HULA-HOOPS

IN CASE YOU HADN'T NOTICED, ONE NAME KEEPS CROPPING UP IN THE *GUINNESS BOOK OF WORLD RECORDS* PERFORMING A BIZARRE ARRAY OF FEATS: ASHRITA FURMAN. IN FACT, FURMAN HOLDS THE WORLD RECORD FOR THE NUMBER OF WORLD RECORDS HE HAS SET. BUT AS THE HUMBLE NEW YORKER TOLD *SPORT MONTHLY* ON HIS RECENT RECORD-BREAKING TRIP TO AUSTRALIA, THERE'S NOTHING TRIVIAL ABOUT HULA HOOPS AND MILK BOTTLE BALANCING: ASHRITA FURMAN WANTS TO SHOW THE WORLD THAT ANYONE CAN BE A CHAMPION AT SOMETHING - IF THEY SET THEIR MIND TO IT.

WORDS **MARK JUDDERY** PHOTOGRAPHY **ERIK WILLIAMSON**

"WE SHOULD ALL PUSH OURSELVES TO DO SOMETHING GREATER. IT'S A WAY FOR ME TO MAKE SPIRITUAL PROGRESS AND HAVE FUN AT THE SAME TIME."

ONE SUNDAY LAST OCTOBER, the impossible happened in Munich – numerous times. A Slovakian muscleman juggled three 7.25kg shot putts, keeping them in the air for 52 minutes. A Czech juggler set 124 records in 100 minutes, using various parts of his body to move everything from dice to coconuts. An Ethiopian athlete laughed non-stop (seemingly at nothing) for an hour and 40 minutes, working the crowd into a lather of shared hysteria. An Austrian 'cello virtuoso (and occasional ultra-distance runner) played continuously for over 11 hours. Welcome to the ninth Impossibility Challenger. Not the world's biggest sports event, but some of the moments simply couldn't be matched at the Olympics.

Great as these achievements were, none of the champions became superstars. Not immediately, at least. According to the organisers, the object was "to overcome human limitations and to challenge the seemingly impossible." The participants might describe their goal more bluntly: to break a world record.

The term "Guinnessport" was coined in the 1970s, when people were doing everything from eating bicycles (yes, seriously) to growing abnormally long fingernails, simply for a place in *The Guinness Book Of World Records*, the world's best-selling book. Once an annual event, the Impossibility Challenger was returning after a decade in hiatus.

In such an event, the king of Guinnessport – and the chief drawcard – was not about to be upstaged. In the space of a few hours, he broke not one record, but three.

Few were surprised. Ashrita Furman has broken so many records, in so many disciplines, that in 1987 *Guinness* editor Norris McWhirter presented him with the title "Mr Versatility." Furman was then crowned with another new record: the most world records in unrelated categories.

Over the past 25 years, Furman has broken 78 records, in everything from yodelling to land-rowing. "Ask fans who's the greatest athlete of all time," *The Christian Science Monitor* once wrote, "and you'll hear a familiar debate over the likes of Muhammad Ali, Michael Jordan and Babe Ruth. Ask avid readers of *The Guinness Book Of World Records*, however, and you're likely to hear consensus on one name: Ashrita Furman."

At the Impossibility Challenger, he did a "triathlon." First, he broke the speed record for one mile (1.6km) hula-hoop spinning. Well, "shattered" might be a better word. His time was 18 minutes and 7 seconds – more than 10 minutes faster than the previous time. Record two: "lunges", that torturous warm-up exercise in which (as the rules clearly state) the knee must touch the ground at every step. He travelled a mile in this fashion – something that would even impress Monty Python's Minister for Silly Walks. But then, the agony on his face was no joke. Nor was the record. He made it in 30:50 (six

minutes under the previous time). Record three: standing on a gymnastic (Swiss) ball. He bettered his own previous record (1 hour, 9 minutes and 42 seconds) by remaining balanced for 2 hours, 10 minutes and 57 seconds. Not a token record, but a significant leap.

Record-breaking is a tough business, even for Mr Versatility. Each record requires new muscles, a new training regime. In his triathlon, as with any triathlon, the cross-training presented an extra trial. "Everything was based on my legs, on my quadriceps really," he says. "The hula-hoop racing uses a lot of quadriceps. And then we went into the lunges, which is all quadriceps. And then I went on the ball, which again is quadriceps, and also there's a lot of trunk balance."

With most champions, the most obvious question is: how does he/she do it? With Furman, however, another question might take precedence: *why* does he do it? Fame and fortune? Not a chance. Though he is becoming familiar through his appearances on everything from *Oprah* to *Good Morning America* (as "the Carl Lewis of oddball athletics"), he is not exactly a household name. As for fortune . . . in those odd few moments when he isn't training, he manages a health food store in Queens, New York. Inevitably, he has had a few sponsorship offers, but he has turned them down. (After he broke a few pogo stick records, one company wanted to put his face on their pogo-sticks. He politely declined, because he preferred using their competitors' product.)

Of course, there are other reasons to develop sporting prowess. Champions ranging from Ian Thorpe to Andre Agassi have talked of self-transcendence – a focus on surpassing their own performance, rather than beating the competition. Furman takes this concept even further. "I do it for my own spiritual progress, as a way to transcend limits."

With many elite athletes, talk of the spiritual side of athletics is limited to the obligatory thanks to God in their victory speech. To Furman, however, spirituality is his entire rationale. "It's a way for me to tell other people about meditation and what power there is in meditation. We should always push ourselves to do something greater. It keeps me in good shape, it's fun, and I think the ultimate answer is that it's deeply connected to my spiritual life. It's a way for me to make spiritual progress and have fun at the same time."

As you might tell from his choice of exploits, the key word is fun. "The fun thing for me is choosing something new," he says. "What I love about the *Guinness Book* is that I can just go through it and choose something that I've never done before, train for it, and become the best in the world at that event. In a way, that's also a challenge for me: to figure out how to train, the best way to train. The underlying principles are the same in my case, because in the end I'm going back to the inner stream, to the principles of meditation and discovering

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SPORT

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your own inner resources. Everything goes back to that. But on the outer level, how to train for an event and how to overcome some of these obstacles you come across, that's a tremendous challenge for me and that makes it exciting. Often, I'll have to train for months. It's like an inner experience."

KEITH FURMAN (as he was then known) was born in New York in September 1954, in the same week that McWhirter and his twin brother, Ross, began work on the first edition of *Guinness*. Naturally, Furman believes that this was more than just a coincidence. "Somehow I feel that there's a connection, because as a kid growing up, I was seriously interested in the *Guinness Book*." He would read each new edition, devouring every page. At the time, it wouldn't have been taken as a sign of his future exploits, but of his bookish nature. Growing up, Furman had no interest in sport. "I thought it was a waste of time, and I just wanted to develop my brain." As a teenager, he became interested in yoga and eastern philosophy. This led him to become a student of Indian-born meditation teacher Sri Chinmoy. "That altered my whole outlook on life. Instead of the mind being the most important thing, it was now the heart, my spiritual heart." Chinmoy gave him the spiritual name Ashrita (meaning "protected by the Supreme being").

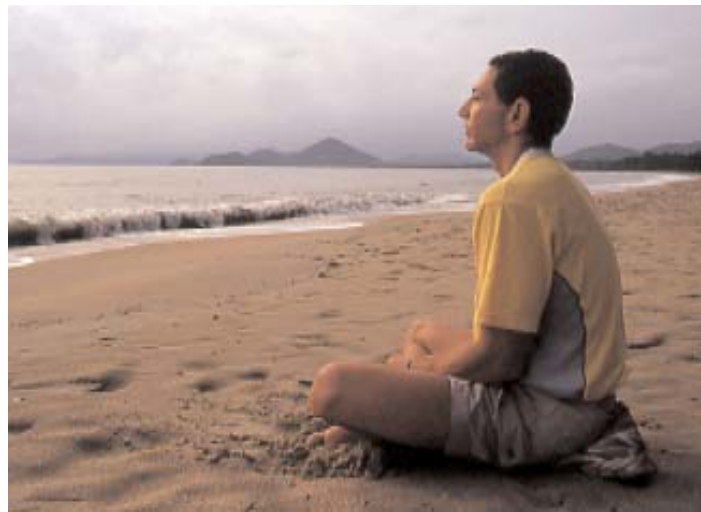
Sport and physical activity are a large part of Sri Chinmoy's teachings, and his name is best-known in Australia through the athletics events arranged by his students (including one of the nation's largest triathlon events, held in Canberra each February). His creative methods have attracted many elite sportspeople, including Carl Lewis and bodybuilding legend Bill Pearl.

Sri Chinmoy is perhaps even more versatile than Furman, his multi-talented student. A poet, lecturer, musician, artist and writer (among his many fields of endeavour), Chinmoy credits meditation for his creative and athletic achievements. But what is the connection between meditation and sport? Quick answer: sport *is* meditation.

Okay, more details. Obviously, the serenity of meditation is a far cry

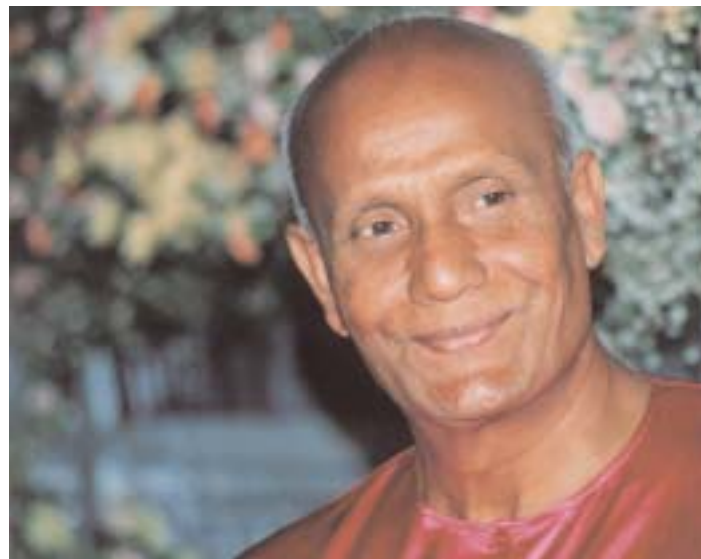


Erik Williamson



Prashputita Greco

The record for milk-crate balancing comes crashing down (far right) – another record for Furman which he dedicates to his meditation teacher, the charismatic and superfit Sri Chinmoy (right).



from the madness of a rugby league grand final or a boxing match. But on a deeper, individual level, a race or a weightlifting session can be seen as a metaphor for life. "Life and sports cannot be separated; they are one," Sri Chinmoy has said. "As a matter of fact, life itself is a game . . . In the life-game, each soul is running, consciously or unconsciously, toward the goal of inner perfection."

Furman still resisted sports until 1978, when a 24-hour bicycle race was arranged to take place in New York's Central Park. With Chinmoy encouraging his students to enter the race, Furman took the plunge, buying himself a bike only two weeks before the event. "Sri Chinmoy asked each person how many miles they expected they were going to," he recalls. "I said to myself, 'Wow, if I could do 200 miles – being

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mark juddery

a total non-athlete, with no training or experience – that would be pretty good.' The best athletes in the group were saying 300 miles, because it was a hilly course, and it was going to be a hot weekend, and crowded. When my turn came, before I could say anything, Sri Chinmoy said, 'So Ashrita, how many miles? Four hundred?' That was shocking to me. I knew that the winner of the race the previous year had only done 425 miles (780km). Sri Chinmoy knew I hadn't done sports, but he could see something that I couldn't see. I decided that I should do 400 miles, or just die trying."

Furman wrote his will (at the age of 23), and went out the next day. "It was a turning point of my life, the basis of all the Guinness records . . . For the first three hours, everything was fine, but after that, my

legs would start hurting me. I had to use all the [meditation] techniques that I had learned over the last few years that I had been a student of Sri Chinmoy. Like, a visualisation technique: 'God is actually massaging my legs, that's not pain.' Or I'd start using breathing techniques, or chanting techniques. It was just an incredible experience. About halfway through, it's dark in Central Park, there's hardly anybody in the course, and I realised I was riding with the leaders of the race. The wind was blowing through my hair. My body was completely pumped up. It was almost effortless."

In the end, he did 405 miles (648km), tying for third place overall (in a field of 20,000) and leaving most of his friends in shock. "I knew that this had nothing to do with my body. This was totally beyond that. It was all in my spirit. I was really elated. I remember staggering off the bicycle, falling on the ground and looking up at the sky, totally exhausted, yet totally exhilarated. At that moment, I decided that I was getting into the *Guinness Book*, but I'm not going to do it for my own ego. I'm going to do it to tell other people about the power of meditation."

He broke his first official record in 1979. After training for months in a Manhattan gym, he performed 27,000 consecutive jumping jacks (side straddle hops). Now he has done everything from applauding (50 continuous hours) to somersaulting (19.6km). "All the records require a deep level of concentration," he says. "My underwater juggling record is almost pure concentration, with a lot of distractions," he adds, referring to a record he recently broke in Kelly Tarlton's Underwater World in Auckland, surrounded by fish.

For someone who dedicates his life to doing things better than anyone else, he is remarkably humble when discussing his exploits. "I don't believe in personal competition," he insists. "Your only rival is, in a sense, yourself. You're trying to reach your maximum ability."

Fine, but (like any elite athlete) he has inspired some serious rivals. The most persistent, British daredevil Terry Cole, has broken many of his records. Furman usually gets them back.

"It's an inspiration to me," Furman says. "When someone takes a record, I can find more capacity within myself to break it." He considers one record, in which Cole balanced a stack of 50 beer



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SPORT

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glasses on his chin for ten seconds – an incredible feat of balance. Furman decided to practise this record himself, and did 51 glasses.

"It took a lot of trial and error. The glasses are very fragile, and when they get high, the whole tower starts swaying . . . One of the middle glasses will crack, and the thing comes crashing down. You've got to run."

For a time, the record was bouncing between Furman and Cole. Eventually, Furman balanced 62 glasses on US national television. No more was heard from Cole. "And then," Furman recalls, "some Japanese guy did 70. This guy was a professional balancer. That's what he does for a living."

Furman was intrigued. Aware that this feat was televised, he obtained a videotape and studied it. "His technique was far superior to mine, so I really benefited from seeing what he was doing. I was able to use that technique and break the record to 75 [in April 2001]. Now I'm expecting him to come back and do it again, but he hasn't so far. I am a little disappointed, because I currently want to go on to the next step."

Furman has not met his Guinnessport rivals, not even the ubiquitous Cole. "I don't really want to, because I don't want to get into a personal conflict. I really want to maintain this sense of spiritual progress, of doing this not to beat anybody else, or because of my ego, but to try to push myself to my own limits, and at the same time go deep within, learn about my own inner self."

In case there is any doubt of his humility, note that Furman broke his last record so far – another hula-hoop mile – in January, during a visit to Australia. Hear about that? No. He sought a low profile. After the cheering crowds of Munich, and smaller but equally excited audiences in New Zealand, he wanted relative quietude, accompanied by two helpers, some official witnesses, and no media other than a video cameraman (for verification) and *Sport Monthly*.

This record had a personal significance. A frequent traveller, he had set records in six continents – underwater pogo-sticking through the Amazon, step-ups in South Africa, pogo-sticking (yet again) up Japan's Mount Fuji. He had even taken his pogo-stick to Antarctica in 2000, breaking the one-mile record on an Argentinian base. Australia was the last frontier.

It was Uluru that had particularly inspired him, partly because it was so isolated, and partly for its spiritual significance. The 35 degree heat? That only increased the challenge – and thereby, the attraction.

His choice of record was even more surprising than the venue, mainly because he still held the record from Munich. In fact, nobody else had ever claimed this record. Always an endurance specialist, he had set the first speed record in Cambodia in 2000, while attempting to create a new category: the longest distance travelled while



spinning a hula-hoop around his waist. Furman has invented a few records in the past (underwater juggling, 24-hour basketball dribbling), but recently, Guinness has lost interest in endurance events, believing that they are less competitive. Rather than accepting his five-mile (8km) distance, they introduced a record for the fastest mile. "They took my first mile, which was 28:40. That was very, very slow. In Germany, I went for speed, and I was able to do 18:07."

"Again, I still feel that it's not where I want to be," he said, a day before heading to Uluru. "I have a lot more capacity that I'm not using, and this concept of self-transcendence – pushing to your maximum level and then going beyond that. Also, I really loved the hula hooping. I just enjoy it so much. I found a technique, where I think I can break it by a few minutes."

An AIS coach would consider his training program to be decidedly amateur. For two weeks, he had daily training sessions at the resort town of Palm Cove (north of Cairns), where the heat would almost

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Rocks in his head? In January (left), Furman set his new mark for the one mile distance while hula hooping. In New Zealand (above), he sank the old mark for underwater juggling.

prepare him for Uluru, but the humidity was somewhat misleading. He first saw Uluru – and indeed, the Australian outback – only four hours before attempting the record.

A vegetarian at all times, his diet stays basically the same, whatever the record. "The only thing that does change is that sometimes I'll need more body weight and muscles. Other times I'll need less body weight and I'll need to be slimmer and lighter."

For a world record attempt, the set-up was unusually relaxed. Arriving in the resort area at midday, we made a quick visit to the local store where Furman bought a bag of dried fruit and several bottles of water, both for himself and his crew. We wasted no time driving on to Uluru itself, to scout for a good section of the road surrounding the rock. The plan was to perform the record at dusk, in less formidable heat. But at 4:30pm, we noticed an ideal 200-metre stretch of road along the north-western side of Uluru – straight, flat and free of crowds. "It's not so hot, really," said Furman – deciding that, now we were there, we might as well do it.

Upon walking out of the air-conditioned van, he realised that the outback sun wasn't as mild as he had thought. No matter, he agreed that he would brave the afternoon heat and the flies, and attempt to break his own record. If he failed, we could always return at dusk.

As the officials measured the course, Furman meditated in the van. For an endurance event, he usually drinks a Gatorade for electrolytes. This time, he was guzzling a Bundaberg ginger beer because, well, he likes them. Along with the heat, the weather was bringing out some strong, gusty winds, which worried both Furman and his crew. In this record, he was not permitted to drop the hoop.

Not even once. Otherwise, he would need to start from scratch.

After 40 minutes of measuring the course, the stopwatches were started and Furman proceeded, walking at a quick, steady pace while spinning the hoop around his hips. Walking in this fashion is difficult enough for a few metres; a mile is almost an endurance event in itself. However, he walked on, refusing to slow down on any of the 200-metre laps.

As he approached the eighth and final lap, the wind became very strong and he stopped walking. He didn't stop swivelling his hoop, though, and he certainly didn't stop the record. At this point, he simply couldn't concentrate on walking and avoiding the wind at the same time.

As he reached the finish line, his crew was cheering. So were some Aussie tourists in a four-wheel-drive van, who stopped out of curiosity and found themselves staying for the show (signing their names as official witnesses). His time was 15:25, trimming two and a half minutes off his previous record. Though his friends have lost count of the records they have witnessed, and now *expect* him to succeed, this one is special – and not simply due to its location. This proves that his versatility is not limited to his varying activities. It proves that he can break both speed and endurance records.

He definitely feels the difference. "In a sense, I really like the endurance records more, because they're more meditative. I like the intensity [of sprint records], but you don't get those hours and hours of training. I go out for 10-12 hours doing a training run and come back totally transformed. And you don't get that with, say, the most glasses on your chin for 10 seconds, or even the hula-hoop mile."

Fortunately, Furman can handle speed. At age 48, he isn't slowing down. Indeed, his main problem seems to be deciding which new events he should tackle. Though he hoped to do a cartwheel record in Australia, he didn't feel that he had reached the required level. Instead, he plans to do it soon in the US. Another long-term project is stilt-walking. He has been practising for years, with only cuts and bruises to show for it. The current record (five miles – 8km – in 42 minutes) was set 100 years ago. Even technology hasn't toppled it, though Furman hopes to use high-tech equipment in his attempt. (He has already tried stilts with Kevlar springs, but they were too heavy.) Meanwhile, he wants to try one of his old favourites again: hopscotch – or, to be specific, the most games played in 24 hours.

Of course, hopscotch – like sack-racing, hula-hooping and many of his other activities – is fun (even if 24 hours sounds like overkill). For a geek who never liked sports, Ashrita Furman almost seems to be catching up on his childhood. He's not only breaking records, but enjoying himself as well, tackling each new game like an enthusiastic kid. There is surely something meditative in that. **SM**