

The Power of a Ball: How Sports Can Save Us from Ourselves

by Tom Hyde

I was in Mongolia, crossing the Gobi Desert in a Russian army jeep. The Russians had occupied the country for more than 70 years but with the collapse of the Soviet Union they had pulled out, leaving Mongolia an independent country for the first time in the 20th century.

Months earlier, in Auckland, New Zealand, where I was employed by an Australian-owned news magazine, I was one of a handful of journalists invited to a government reception for a Mongolian trade delegation, its purpose to promote Mongolia's new Western (free enterprise) approach to business and economy.

Among the visitors that day, I met a twenty-something Mongolian entrepreneur who had founded a new adventure tourism company. His name was Batcha (Mongolians tend to go by one name only) and almost flippantly he invited me to "stop by sometime." He gave me his card, suggesting we "take a drive" across the Gobi Desert, that had not been crossed overland by anyone but Russians and nomads since the 1920s. He suggested I might be the first American to make the crossing overland since Roy Chapman Andrews (see below) in the 1920s.

Not long after, I was off to China to report on New Zealand businesses engaged in joint ventures with the Chinese government, in Shanghai and Beijing. A brewery, a leather tannery, and an investment advisory firm were among my subjects, only seeing as I was in the neighborhood, so to speak, I extended my itinerary to include a flight from Beijing to Ulaanbaatar, the Mongolian capital, and take Batcha up on his offer.

Ulaanbaatar, the capitol, is tucked in among mountains so tight the airport runway, like a drag strip, had an upslope at the end to help planes stop before running off the end. I disembarked and passed through Immigration and Customs hassle free and found Batcha, who was waiting with a driver. They dropped me off at the Bayangol Hotel, the only hotel in the city at the time (today international chain hotels and resorts are there) and after a night's sleep we were off the next morning in the jeep loaded down with supplies and two 20-gallon water tanks and tents.

When the Russians pulled out of the country, they left hardware behind, foremost military jeeps that apparently came cheap and, the visionary he was, Batcha scooped up a couple for his new adventure tour company.

We quickly left the city behind. A new asphalt road that linked the airport and the city (the only paved road in the country at the time) was only a few miles long and just as quickly a dirt road became a track that became no discernable road at all.

The Gobi has dunes like the Sahara but mostly its high plateau and hilly steppe, no roads, so you just go where you want to go. Asking directions, a nomad (Mongolians are traditionally nomadic) might tell you to head towards a certain mountain in the far distance then swing left.

Our planned journey was south across the Gobi to Dalanzadgad, a town of about 20,000 people and though it was only 350 miles away the jeep and the nature of the terrain, and stops along the way, meant it took us four days to get there.

One of those stops was Bayanzag, the largest dinosaur fossil site in the world where, in the 1920s, before the Russians arrived and closed the Gobi to outsiders, an American naturalist and adventurer named Roy Chapman Andrews, later the Director of the American Museum of Natural History in

New York, made the world's first major discovery of dinosaur bones. It's been said that Chapman was a model for the film character Indiana Jones.

We reached Dalanzadgad and after replacing the jeep's water hose headed north again, taking a slightly westerly route from the one we came south on. We drove for two days without seeing another soul until we came upon a nomad ger, or yurt, that is the Mongolian version of our native American tepee only it's not conical. The ger (pronounced "gare") looks like an upside-down cake tin with a stove pipe rising out of the center.

We pulled up. A herd of goats, camels and horses were outside. Horses are the main mode of transport in the Gobi. It's said Mongolian kids learn to ride before they learn to walk and that's not too much of an exaggeration when you consider they are taught to ride from about the age of two or three.

We pulled up and out came a family of five—father, mother and three kids of which the oldest was a boy I guessed to be about 11 or 12 years old. They invited in for a cup of tea and there I was in the one of the most remote places on the planet sitting in a Mongolian ger when the first offering was not tea, but a local brew called *hormog*, that was, fermented camel's milk whose smell alone put buttermilk to shame. The odor was so strong I declined to taste it leaving the others to laugh at my expense for they knew I wouldn't taste it. Westerners rarely do, I was told. Batcha took the cup off me and knocked it back like it was 25-year Scottish single malt.

Next on the menu was dried camel gut. Batcha pointed out fresh gut hanging from the rafters, as if I was keen to know more about how the stuff is produced. It was brittle. I broke off a piece and began to chew. And chew. And chew. Just about ready to spit it out when the father of the house passed me a cup of tea, black tea, no milk, no sugar, as I like it, and that helped me down the dried gut.

Only just as I was sipping tea, I looked over at the boy who sat staring back at me with a wide grin. As we made eye contact, he reached behind himself and pulled out a basketball. Not a leather ball but a rubber ball, the kind of outdoor ball you might buy at Kmart for \$19.95.

Batcha looked at me and asked: "Do you play basketball?" And by chance I was playing at the time, back in New Zealand, where every Saturday morning a group of old boys got together at a school gym from 10:30 till noon for half court games. A fine excuse for a midday beer on Saturday. "Yes, I do play," I told the guide. "Well," he said, "this boy would like to go outside and play, would you mind?"

The kid and I went outside and began passing the ball back and forth and there we were: a young Mongolian boy playing ball with a middle aged (overweight) American in the middle of the Gobi Desert. We were of vastly different age groups and cultures and did not speak the same language, but we were communicating, in a sense, with the ball.

It was at that moment I felt my theory of sports as a unifying force was validated. That sports unlike other institutions, namely religion and politics, has the power to connect people who are infinitely different yet put a ball between them and the rest doesn't matter.

I've seen this time and again in my travels where sports become a gateway to communication that would not have happened without the presence of a ball. A soccer ball in many cases. Playing ball in one form or another normalizes us in a world that can feel less than normal if we focus only on our differences. A ball unites like nothing else.

Playing soccer in the Tongan Islands or basketball in New Zealand or golf in the Middle East and then that day in the Gobi Desert I've reached the conclusion that people are people and the constructive nature of ball games might be the thing that ultimately saves us from our more destructive instincts. It's the power of the ball.

Just then the others came out and it was time to move on, only at that moment the boy took a step and jumped up and tossed the ball to me and he did so he called out, as kids will do: "Michael Jordan!"

Holy cow, I thought, and asked Batcha: "How does this kid know Michael Jordan?" "Come with me," he said, and he led me around back of the ger to a large satellite dish with a cable running inside. I didn't see it at the time, for it was covered up with a blanket, but the family had a television that ran on solar power—Batcha pointed out the solar panel on top of the ger—and once a week the father adjusted the dish until the picture was clear and there in the middle of the Gobi Desert the entire family sat and watched an NBA game of the week.

I have not been back, but my guess is wherever that boy is today, he would be in his 30s now, he still remembers the day he "played basketball" with an American guy who turned up unexpectedly and who knows, maybe he's living in Ulaanbaatar and enjoying the pleasure of a ball, a court and a hoop with a net.
