

Opinion

Being the best

Sep 30, 2011

SEPT 30 — A black stretch limousine pulled up in front of Fifth Avenue's New York Public Library, and the woman everyone was waiting for on that sunny September morning stepped out to the flash of cameras, eager to capture her Medusa-like fingernails.

Chris "The Duchess" Walton, a 45-year-old from Las Vegas, has spent the last 18 years resisting the temptation to bite her nails to become the world record holder for "longest fingernails on a pair of female hands."

According to the Guinness World Records — a best-selling world records reference book published annually — they collectively measure a whopping 601.9cm long, as tall as an average male giraffe.

Before a thicket of press lining the library's steps, the mother of five and grandmother of three joked that it took "candy and a lot of patience" to grow her nails.



The Duchess in all her long-nailed glory on the steps of the library! — Picture by Helen Hickey

She had painted them herself in gold for today's occasion, and also confirmed that she manages a little housework and to style her peroxide blonde mane.

While she claimed it was never her plan to become a record holder, she is making the most of her debut in the Guinness World Records 2012 edition —themed "unique beauty" and recently on sale — with the simultaneous release of her first single "Phoenix" from the album "Live and Let Live".

A rock star and world record holder; she may be both. But how on earth does she manage her daily ablutions? No one dared ask.

Just minutes before The Duchess' arrival, I asked Samantha Fay, senior vice-president USA and head of global marketing for Guinness World Records, New York, what inspires people like The Duchess to do what they do?

"It is all about being the best," explained Fay, a bubbly British expatriate dressed in aquamarine to compliment the book's cover. "It's about 'superlatives', people wanting to be the most pierced, the most tattooed, the fastest, the strongest, it's a human nature thing that starts off as the

competitive streak you notice in kids from an early age," she adds.

She's met the most pierced woman, Elaine Davidson from Scotland, who has 4,225 pieces of metal attached to, and inside, her body. The mere threat of someone trumping her record will send her scampering for more because "she absolutely has to be the most pierced woman in the world."

In compiling the 3,500 records listed in the 2012 Guinness book, Fay's favourite moment was meeting the tallest man in the world, Sultan Kösen. She took him to Manhattan's Top of the Rock, Rockefeller Centre's popular 70th floor outdoor observation deck where, to her delight, he commented: "For the first time in my life I feel small."

The Turkish 251cm "gentle giant", who also has the world's largest hands and feet, is not a (triple) record holder by choice: a pituitary gland tumour is responsible for his gargantuan proportions.

Revolutionary gamma-knife surgery on the tumour has now halted its growth hormone production, although this hasn't deterred publicity-seeking sponsors from donating a custom-built house (the Turkish government), car, shoes (Converse) and his first pair of jeans (Levi's).

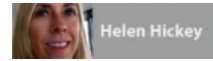
Closer to home is New Yorker Ashrita Furman, who is arguably the "best" world record holder given he has the most — currently 102. The bullying he endured at school made him "determined to be good at something," explained Fay.

He runs a health food store in Queens, New York City, but don't let that fool you into assuming any degree of normality. One of Furman's earliest records is "jumping" 11.5 miles up and down the foothills of Mount Fuji, Japan... on a pogo stick.

In 2002 he had the world's longest pencil assembled in Malaysia by Faber-Castell. It took 7,000 man-hours over a two-year period to build the 20m-tall pencil made from Malaysian lumber.

It was housed in a glass enclosure outside Faber-Castell's facility near Kuala Lumpur, before being shipped to New York; did anyone see this?

And speaking of Malaysia, take a peek at its 2012 world records; I shan't mention the "most canings" record — painful in many



Helen Hickey is a British expat who has recently moved from the jungles of Kuala Lumpur to another of the concrete variety, New York City. She writes to escape her four young children and secure what little remains of her sanity.



A phalanx of photographers greets the arrival of The Duchess. — Picture by Helen Hickey



Fay (left) and Sultan on Top of the Rock in New York. —
Picture by Sam Fay

respects.

As for current trends in world records, Guinness is witnessing a lot more technology records, like the world's smallest mobile phone, which "measures the size of my thumbnail" Fay confirmed with an air of bewilderment.

Fay's all-time favourite record — and written on the back of her business card — is that of Walt Saine of Switzerland. Choosing this from 60,000 records currently listed on Guinness' files, she describes as her "duh moment."

On October 30, 2010, Saine became the dubious holder of the most kicks to one's own head in one minute — 110 — having used both his right and left leg to kick himself in the forehead an average of 1.8 times per second. This record is apparently "broken" regularly.

And me? As I stood, entranced by The Duchess' golden talons glittering in the sun's rays, I decided to continue with what I do best — "trying" my best. "Being the best" might well involve one very large headache...

** The views expressed here are the personal opinion of the columnist.*