

THE NEW YORKER

TOP THIS DEPT.

WHO'S COUNTING?

by Lauren Collins

DECEMBER 6, 2004

On the scale of public ignominy, the last person to squeeze into a crowded New York



elevator rates somewhere between the guy who hits “reply all” to group e-mails and the one who blocks the box. So the other night, in the lobby of the Le Parker Meridien hotel, on Fifty-seventh Street, a latecomer who stepped out so that the doors could close was surprised to hear the other passengers beckoning her back. The elevator, it turned out, was full of world record-holders. They were heading to a gala that the Guinness Book of Records was throwing to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. “Let’s see how many we can get in here!” a man with a cast on his right arm—Furthest Basketball Dunk from a Trampoline?—called out.

Once the passengers reached the forty-second floor (the building’s highest, naturally), they were treated to a buffet dinner and a program that included videotaped salutations from Donald Trump and Regis Philbin and remarks by Stuart Claxton, Guinness’s head adjudicator in North America. According to Claxton, all records, as long as they are verifiable, measurable, and breakable, are considered equally laudable (excepting such nonstarters as the dog with the fewest legs, the longest time staring at the sun, and an attempt, by a family in Hungary, to build the world’s biggest wall of sausages). Claxton’s speech was largely ignored. The recordholders were eager to get started meeting each other:

“Dan Netherland, two thousand and fifty pounds of concrete broken in 17.45 seconds.”

“Arthur Blessitt. I’ve walked through three hundred and one nations, island groups, and territories.”

“My name is Martin Strel, from Slovenia. You know where is Slovenia?”

It was possible, in the course of the evening, to decipher a pecking order, of sorts. For example, in ascending order of prestige: Most Bridal Bouquets Caught, Greatest Distance Moonwalked in One Hour, Most Golf Balls Stacked, Highest Shallow Dive, Most Sword Cuts Survived (this last one is in the process of being verified). At the top of the heap were Jackie Bibby, a Texan who can hold eight live rattlesnakes in his mouth for 12.5 seconds, and Ashrita Furman, of New York, who, with the most individual world records set (eighty-six), is something of a record breaker’s record breaker.

Furman, a fifty-year-old travel agent and the manager of a health-food store, is renowned for, among eighty-three other things, balancing twenty-three milk crates on his chin for 11.23 seconds, somersaulting eight thousand three hundred and forty-one times in 10.5 hours over twelve miles, and scaling Mt. Fuji on a pogo stick. On the day of the gala, he had tried to set the record for Fastest 100m. While Seated on a Rubber Ball. “I’m very, very busy,” he explained. “This is really just a fraction of what I do. I can hardly afford to be here. I’m leaving for China on Monday. I’m going on a spiritual retreat, but I’m hoping to break a few records while I’m there.”

Furman played the paterfamilias graciously, signing other recordholders’ Guinness books: “To a fellow impossibility challenger. Good luck! Ashrita”; “To Debbie—Reach for the Skies!” Furman said that he considered all record-setting endeavors equally worthwhile, because, “in some way, you’re improving humanity,” but he couldn’t help making a distinction or two. “You know, the tallest guy, he didn’t do anything to deserve it,” he said. “It happens. And, you know, it’s fascinating. But, for me, the discipline, the training, the challenge of it—that’s what I’m after.”

And so it was with a measure of deference that the bridal-bouquet catcher, Stephanie Monyak, whose métier requires little

more than luck and a deep pool of single friends, approached Furman. "You've broken eighty records," Monyak said.

"Eighty-six, eighty-six," Furman said. "But who's counting?"

After Monyak had gone, Furman said, "Just being in this room, I'm beginning to get some ideas. Like, the moonwalking." He leaned in. "O.K., I hate to say it, but I don't think that guy is that good. If I was gonna do it, I'd get to be really good. I mean, it's a mile and a matter of technique."

One by one, the honorees were summoned to the front of the ballroom to receive certificates and medals: the Long Distance Grape Catcher, the Fastest Talker. Then the m.c. announced that there would be a final award, for lifetime achievement. He called out the name Ashrita Furman, and the crowd turned to see Furman bounding across the ballroom on a pair of springy stilts—the tallest man in the world.
