



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

THE FALL ON



The two PJs. NCL04-664



Breathtaking views from atop the Great Wall. NCL04-518s



Breathtaking views from atop the Great Wall. NCL04-518s

THE Beatles sang about a "Fool on a Hill", but have you heard the one about "The Fall on the Wall?"

If you were with me last week, you may recall that I was in the Capital of China, Beijing visiting Patrick, for once not surrounded by the 20 million inhabitants of that city, but on our own, under a beautiful blue sky, hiking our way along the Great Wall of China.

It was Day 1 of our adventure and after a half hour's climb, Patrick Jack and I finally stood on a section of the Great Wall. There was not a sinner in sight thanks to Patrick's success at getting us "Off Piste" and well off the well worn tourist trail. It was amazing to think that this great construction which started 6 Centuries BC and was regularly added to until the 16th century AD by the Ming and Qing dynasties. Its purpose was to keep out the Mongols and to prevent them from invading. Nowadays the only hordes of invaders are a mere-wielding tourists all contributing to the local economy.

This part of Beijing has applied for the 2022 Winter Olympics and so hopes to become the only place to be awarded both Summer and Winter games. There are literally hundreds of high rise buildings in the local villages - unfinished but which will be operational soon to cater for the influx of foreign and local tourists. All of them want to participate in a living history of walking in the footsteps of their Ming predecessors over many centuries. The Great Wall of China is where history and geography merge.

"Can you see the Great Wall of China from space?" is the usual question. Well, can you see the wall at the bottom of your garden from space? Of course not. The same is true about the Great Wall. It may be over 2,000 miles in length, sometimes you can't see much from it on a smoggy day but obviously you can't see it from very far away, never mind space. When we stood on it however, it is so impressive to gaze and wonder in awe as it snakes its way over the tops of the mountains and down into the valleys, all the while protecting the citizens lucky enough to be inside the wall from any hostile forces on the outside.

After years of seeing pictures of the Wall, it was great at last to be standing on the mighty rampart. Walking on the wall however is not

as easy as it sounds. It is extremely uneven and very rarely straight. It is as up and down as the spine of the mountain range that it follows. Patrick and I exited the Wall to make it back down to our hostel where we spent some time with the animals of the family, three lovely dogs and a rabbit. That night, we had a very tasty meal with stuff I didn't recognise, so it was reassuring the next morning to find all the livestock still alive and well....

Our aim on Day 2 was to go for a 5 or 6 hour hike so we were given a lift to the end of the road where we started up an even steeper path. I was very impressed with Patrick's strength as he left me staggering behind him on the 30 minute climb up to the wall. Obviously I had left my climbing legs back in Binevenagh.

The next morning, we were given a lift from the hostel to the start of the walk and the temperature in the car showed minus 6. We had been warmed up however by a spicy breakfast of noodles and we had supplies with us for an anticipated 5 or 6 hour hike. We had lots of layers on but I did recall that my nice snug balaclava was lying safely in a drawer back home. At least our crystallised breath in the air reminded us that we were still alive.

The driver brought his car (with a jingling Chairman Mao ornament on the dashboard) to a stop and we were soon on the trail, armed only with rucksacks and an attitude of "Bring it on!". We followed a path that was familiar to Patrick. The last time he was there was in October when you could wear shorts. This time however we would come across sections of the path which were icy. We side stepped those as we certainly didn't want a fall in these conditions and in this deserted countryside....

After 30 minutes of hard graft we were again standing on the shoulders of ghosts from the past looking at the Great Wall which divided inner from outer China. As soon as we did however, we were buffeted by a really strong biting wind which must have lowered the air temperature to more than (or is that less than) 10 degrees below zero. We didn't hang about and we set off - down - the Wall.

I have been fortunate enough to see lots of views from lots of hills

all over the world.

In Borneo on the slopes of Kinabalu, there were the lush green forests of the jungle way below us. In Nepal I hiked through strangely familiar rhododendron bushes in the lower slopes of Everest. In Elbrus in Russia, the valleys sparkled below the snow line. In Morocco in the Atlas Mountains, the icy landscape concealed a carved out valley all the way down to the gateway town of Imilil. Here in the Western Hills, it was certainly cold enough for snow, but there is just no precipitation. There has been two days of rain in Patrick's time during his sojourn since August. I have no idea where the water for a fifth of a billion people comes from. The trees were slanted and lifeless but the views from the hills were breath-taking. Up here there were no clouds, fog or smog and on a clear day you felt you could see the future, never mind the past. The future for China is bright. At home we are all encouraged to be individuals. In China, despite the strict adherence to the one child policy, you are brought up to believe in the power of the collective, to be a vital cog in the machine for the betterment of the community. You toe the party line, you do what you are told. The juggernaut of communism moves on, free from worry about the need to look after the wishes of mere individuals. Despite the heavy hand of the state on the tiller of reform, I found the people to be cheerful and bright. In Russia I had to look out for a smile. Here in China, I didn't need to lend them one of my own. Three hours after we started, we were literally climbing and our hands and knees up a really steep section onto the top of a rampart which was so steep it wouldn't be good news if you suffered from vertigo. Ahead lay hundreds of kilometres of wall veering out in to the hinterland of the world's most populated country. We both decided however that we should turn back as our village was "Somewhere" down there to our right. We wanted to be back before darkness fell. I thought if we safely negotiated this vertiginous section for a few hundred metres, we could then pop off the wall and then make our way down through an anticipated, there was yet unseen route, through the dead trees.

At the distance we could see a settlement. **We had had a great hike, we had some food and water left. The views were awesome, what could possibly go wrong?**

Forty five minutes later we were in a narrow gorge where we half climbed, half jumped down past crumbling scree filled slopes. I was tired and when you are tired you make mistakes. I have had a few trips and stumbles on hikes before, but other than a few bruises I have been lucky. Soon however my luck was about to run out.

Patrick was ahead of me leading the way for his old man pushing the branches of the trees out of the way. I was practically sitting down but sliding as well. I put my left hand out to arrest my descent, when suddenly my left hand hit something. I knew this wasn't good. I stopped and tore my glove off. While most of my hand was pointing North, my wee finger was pointing West. Way out West.... This isn't good I thought. Waves of pain started to flood into one side of my body and waves of adrenaline were released from the other side of my body to fight this pain and when these set of waves collided in the middle, there was a Tsunami of a crash. I didn't know whether to throw up or faint, so I just sat down and put my head against a rock and tried to prevent the world from spinning round. Patrick knew that something was up and that his leadership and motivational skills would be needed more than ever to get us off the hill and down and in one piece. He instantly said we should go "Home" today (i.e. Beijing) - I agreed. I was sorry that I had ruined our plans for a hike on day three but it was an easy three hour one in any event. We don't do easy - and today was not going to be an easy day.

I put my glove back on hoping that maybe somehow when I next took it off my troubles would be over and my digit would suddenly be in the right place. Ironically, my accident had occurred in the least hazardous spot out of the dozens we had already encountered - but you deal with the cards that are dealt to you. There is no point in turning out clock back, you just get on with it.

Thirty minutes of hiking and hacking our way through the trees, we made it at last onto terra firma and we followed an actual bona fide road all the way past the security point back to the hostel where Patrick got me pain killers and pain relief spray. My rucksack was kindly packed for me as I lay on the unmade bed in the sun trying not to doze off as the last waves of adrenaline receded.

PLASTERED!!!!

The next morning, Patrick boned up on various Mandarin expressions such as "He has a broken finger" and "This old cjt fell - and he was even sober at the time!" so that he might be able to steer us through the maze known as the Chinese equivalent of the NHS at the local H a d i a n G e n e r a l Hospital in Beijing. We paid 60 pence to get registered on the system and a young helpful Doctor told me I needed an x-ray. Ten minutes later after paying £10.00 for two pictures, I was the proud owner of two x-rays on which my age was given as four years younger than it actually is - What is there not to like about the Chinese health system?!

Another doctor in another building was given the task of plastering of not only my finger but half of my arm. If you had told me a few nights previously as I was slinging back the Singapore slings that I would be getting plastered in Beijing, this wouldn't have been what I had anticipated.... A doctor in his operating greens solemnly prepared a piece of thermal plaster in a vat of boiling water and put it over a bandage on my wounded arm. Thankfully I had already transferred my watch onto my right wrist otherwise I would be hearing the alarm go off for the next month or so before being able to turn it off.

One of the doctors had looked at me somewhat reproachfully when he asked me when the accident had occurred, (1.30 pm the previous day) and hinted that perhaps I should have come to hospital sooner. The night before however, all I wanted was a taxi, a slow train, an underground train, then a shower, then a bottle of red pain killer, then some much needed sleep. Downstairs, we paid another £10.00 for some drugs and off we went to McDonalds for a much needed shot of caffeine where every other person coming in was carrying a set of their own x-rays, so, obviously I wasn't the only "Fool on the Hill".



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THE WALL!

This column is about sport, so what floats the boat of the typical Chinese sport lover?

Well there is tennis with Li Nan, very famous for having won a Grand Slam Tennis Tournament. Then there is soccer.

The Beijing team is called Guoan, they play in a 60,000 seater stadium with tickets costing only a few quid and where the noisiest fans are a bunch of ex pats from floor 8 of the Halls of Residence in Renmin College.

There was Basketball where tickets were like gold dust - the well paid Yanks on the team aren't allowed to play in the last quarter of the match so that it is an all Chinese affair when the final whistle blows.

Then there is the martial arts - every morning in the parks you see scores of people practicing their well-rehearsed-moves in a daily ritual. There is cycling as the Tour of Beijing was on

last September, but you would need to be a braver man than me, despite Katie Melua's call for 9 million bicycles in Beijing.

Then there is table tennis so Patrick and I had a game on one of the may tables in the College Sports Hall and suffice to say that PJ won (though thankfully his father was able to retain and salvage a modicum of pride in the eventual score line). Table tennis really is the national sport and the locals are exceptionally good.

I also had a go on a sledge on a frozen lake beside speed skaters, bumper cars and cyclists.

There was also a gym where I decided on a whim to do a 1,000 sprints.

That was a first and I broke 50 minutes.

I had no real need to do a thousand sprints, but I was frustrated at not being able to do much else with a wounded wing.

Sport is all about glorious stupidity.

There is no real need for sport, it doesn't put food on your table or fuel in your petrol tank but there is all the more need to have a positive endorphin releasing outlet in these dark days of a thousand sit ups. The next time that I face in a difficult challenge in a race that actually counts, I could hark back to the time when I managed to accomplish a fairly pointless goal which was the abdominal equivalent of getting kicked in the ribs by a mule.

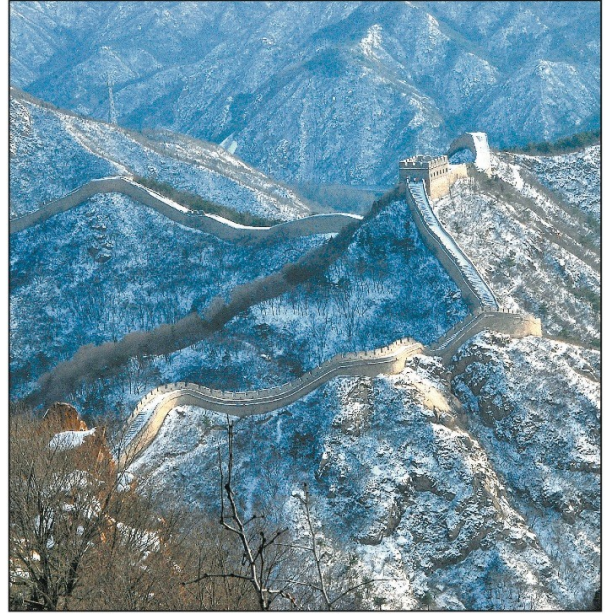
WE NEED A RUNNING TRACK - PJJ SAY IT AGAIN!

Lastly, I decided to have a go on the first class school tartan track. You may think it strange that there isn't a decent track in the 141,699 strong new super council area but there is one for 5,000 stu-

dents of Renmin College and indeed there was another track 500 metres away for a similar amount of students at Renmin University. But it does show the priorities of the powers that be...

It was the last day of my stay and I wanted to see how my lungs would cope with the pollution levels of 170. I battered round and pushed as hard as I could and all the time realising why young Patrick does his running on a treadmill in a fairly pollution free gym... A few hours later I was on the way to the airport. The night before we had been in Paddy O'Shea's Bar in down town Beijing where I met a bloke who knows Joe Broly, so maybe the world is one global village after all.

Where Patrick Jack was headed shortly for Thailand and Laos, I was headed for home and in the 141,699 strong new super council area but there is one for 5,000 stu-



The Great Wall in winter: not many other walkers about in January! NCL04-400s



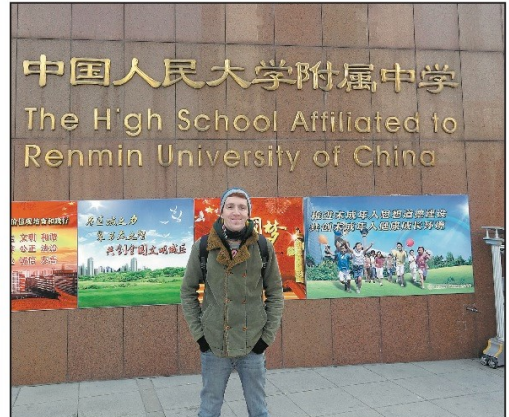
Isn't it strange that there isn't a decent track in the 141,699 strong new super council area but there is one for 5,000 students of Renmin College and indeed there was another track 500 metres away for a similar amount of students at Renmin University. NCL04-755s



Sound advice. You're asked not to walk on the ice...NCL04-569s



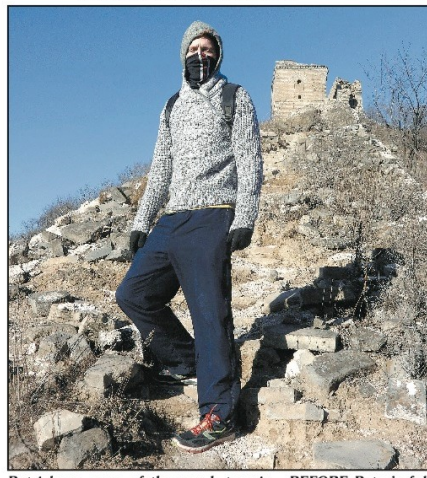
But you can kart!!! NCL04-584s



The school where Limavady lad Patrick Jack is teaching English and Current Affairs. NCL04-529s



A 'convenience store' along the Great Wall! NCL04-526s



Patrick on some of the rough terrain - BEFORE Peter's fall. NCL04-507s



AFTER the fall...with wounded wing Peter is still exercising his one working hand. NCL04-536s