Christian Danielsen
Professor Boe
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Paperclip Man

Radhakant Bajpai of India currently has the longest bunch of ear hair in the world, measuring just over 5 inches. In 1997, Davis Huxly of Australia pulled a Boeing 747 weighing 184 tons a distance of 91 meters. And in 1993, the Italian clothing firm Benetton constructed what is still the largest condom ever made: a 72-foot monster that covered an obelisk in Paris to mark World AIDS Day. Such is the world of world records, where the physically amazing, the painfully stupid, and the laughably bizarre are meticulously recorded in *Guinness World Records,* the ultimate authority on superlative feats.

Some records are truly pointless. Enter Daniel Meyer, a 22-year-old student at the University of California at Davis. Dan has wanted a world record since high school, but always knew that his title would have to be something, well, obscure. And after a lot of consideration, Dan decided to challenge the world record for the longest chain of paperclips put together in a 24-hour period. This is the story of Dan. The Paperclip Man.

A week before his attempt took place on May 23, Dan spoke to me about his world-record dream. Dan is basketball-player tall and thin with short brown hair. He laughed frequently and answered my questions with a dry and slightly self-mocking sense

of humor. “I’ve always wanted a record. The ones requiring strength and agility, anything studly really, were immediately out,” he said. “It was really a process of elimination, going through the book and crossing out records that definitely weren’t me. And when I came across the paperclip record, I thought, ‘Yes. I can do this.’ ” The current record was set in 2000 and stands at 895 yards, or just shy of nine football fields. That chain contained 22,025 paperclips.

Ms. Jeanine Van der Meiren of Belgium is the owner of that record. Dan didn’t try to contact Meiren about his attempt to dethrone her and said he would have no remorse about claiming the title for himself: “At first, I was very concerned about breaking her record. Very concerned. But then I found out that she actually has more than one record. So I’m not taking this little old lady’s reason for living away from her.” He also deadpanned, “I do harvest a secret paranoia that she’s going to find out where I’m doing this and she’ll come and try to disrupt it, but I probably give myself too much credit.”

Setting a world record is a complex process. Dan was required to videotape the entire 24-hour period. He had to have some kind of local media coverage. He also had to furnish color photographs and have two witnesses with “some standing in the community” watch the entire event. Finding two people to watch him assemble paperclips for 24 hours was a challenge. Dan offered perks to anyone willing to help him out, including an Internet connection, food, and a television with DVD and video hookups, but even so, the response was underwhelming.

By May 17, only one week before his attempt, Dan had only

secured the help of his friend Troy Sammons, a vet student and a friend of Dan's through their church. Troy wasn't terribly excited about his assignment, but was glad he could help out his friend: "It's kind of humorous, and I really admire Dan for setting a goal and going for it." With only a week to go before "D-Day," as Dan called it, he was getting a little nervous about finding another witness. His publicity effort included an open call for witnesses on his website at www.paperclipchallenge.com and conducting an interview for the UC Davis newspaper, the *California Aggie*, in the hopes of catching someone's attention. "People seem to be very attracted to the weirdness of it, so I'm hoping that will help," he said. The website also has a message board. Various notes offer Dan encouragement, sarcastic advice, and one marriage proposal. Dan's website even reached one fan in Leipzig, Germany, who invited him to join the International Record Breakers' Club (www.recordholders.org) if he were to succeed.

Dan is a mathematics major and hopes to teach eventually. As he described his vision for how the 24 hours would play out, he spoke logically, with attention to every detail. He spent months preparing. Along with accounting for Guinness requirements, Dan had to find a corporate sponsor willing to donate 50,000 paperclips (about $200 worth), more than enough to break the record. He clearly wanted to make sure his effort would remain standing for a while, "I definitely want to smash the old record," he said. "I've done practice rounds with a spreadsheet that makes projections; and right now I would probably go about 1,000 feet (about 12,000 clips) over." Dan sent out four letters to various office supply companies.

He got two polite declines and one no-answer. But then, Dan said, "Office Depot called and wanted to know if it was legit. At first their representative was suspicious that it was some kind of prank. I was so happy that someone had replied. Eventually I convinced him and they sent me 50,000 paperclips and some t-shirts."

That brought up another problem. What does one do with a chain of paperclips that would stretch out almost a mile long? Borrowing an idea from Jeanine van der Meiren's strategy, Dan constructed a giant wooden spool that an assistant would use to wind up the chain as Dan would work through the night. Unfortunately, according to Guinness rules, Dan was required to verify the chain's length by stretching it out fully when finished, all within the 24-hour period. Dan didn't work out all the details of this annoying requirement before the attempt, but he imagined going out to one of Davis's many country roads and unraveling it, praying for no tangles. As for what he wanted to do with the chain when everything was done? "I have no idea."

I showed up at Dan's apartment on May 23 at 2:50 p.m., ten minutes early. A van from the local NBC news affiliate was parked outside. Apparently Dan had gotten his media coverage. A typed sign on his front door was the only other indication that a world record attempt was being made here. It read, "Record Breaking in Progress. Come in!" I walked in out of the heat to see an elaborate setup. The couches had been moved into an arc facing the giant spool and a small card table with several chairs. A television displayed the video feed of the room and a digital clock of the

current time. The little dining room had an iMac set up with Dan's spreadsheet and AOL's instant messenger, allowing Dan to get detailed statistics on his pace as he worked and also the ability to give dictated updates to friends online. In one corner were two giant stacks of small boxes, each containing exactly 100 paperclips. Each stack had a sign above it reading "For the Tie" and "For the Win," respectively. Dan greeted me as I walked in the door and then quickly went back to checking last-minute details, nervously giving orders to his support staff of friends while the clock clicked ahead to 3:00:00 p.m. He was wearing his bright red Office Depot t-shirt.

Standing next to the card table were a cameraman and Sacramento reporter John Alston. John was testing his microphone. The expression on his face alternated between amusement and the look of a reporter who was seeing a slow news day. Troy Sammons was sitting on one of the couches, along with Dan's second witness, David Fillingame. Another student and friend from Dan's church, David had known about the project for a long time and was holding out as a possible emergency witness. "There are worse things you could do with your day," he laughed. "Like going to class."

Other friends scurried into position as the final seconds approached. Dan had a total of four assistants: one spooler, two people to unload and untangle paperclips from boxes and finally, one person to pass Dan paperclips in the right orientation to allow for maximum speed. All legal under Guinness rules.

3:00 p.m. Everyone let out a cheer as Dan began to clip away. His technique was flawless, fingers racing like an intricate

machine while he talked and made jokes, only rarely taking his eyes off of his hands. At one point he had to ask his assistants to speed up. The spool was being held in place by a stack of books on either side, specifically, Dan's math textbooks. "The irony is not lost on me," he quipped cheerfully.

Most of Dan's friends were excited about the prospect of being on TV as Alston prepared to broadcast a teaser segment for the six o'clock news. "I need some Vaseline for my teeth!" cracked Dan, clipping furiously. All of a sudden, Alston went into broadcast mode, locked onto the camera and speaking with the anchors back in the studio in a pronounced and practiced voice. "Dave and Lois, I'm standing here with UC Davis student Dan Meyer who is attempting to break the world record for longest paperclip chain. It's not as dull as watching paint dry . . . but it's close. How are you feeling, champ?"

Dan's reply, "I'm great, John. No cramping here!" Laughter broke out behind the camera.

12:31 a.m. A small crisis broke out at around midnight. With the spool containing three tightly wound layers of almost 10,000 clips, David asked the uncomfortable question of whether they would really come off of the spool like that without tangling. Realizing the terrible possibility that nine hours of work might have gone to waste, Dan took only his second break to come up with a plan. Several of Dan's engineering friends were present, and they eagerly threw out suggestions. Eventually, someone came up with the clever idea of separating each layer with Saran Wrap and

duct tape. Immediately Dan went back to work. He was clearly annoyed, furious with himself that he could have overlooked such an important detail, and frightened by the thought that now he would now have to race just to break the old record, instead of obliterating it.

4:15 a.m. A small cheer went up as the latest spreadsheet numbers informed Dan that he had broken the old record, as far as total number of clips put together. His pace had slowed a little, but he was determined to make his margin of victory as large as possible. He also wanted to account for the possibility that the first 10,000 clips would be essentially useless. His friends, meanwhile, had succumbed to fatigue. Dave and Troy slouched on the sofa, eyes drooping as they watched a movie to fight off sleep and boredom. "Watching Dan is kind of hypnotizing," Dave yawned. "Otherwise I'm sure I would have dropped off a long time ago."

Sleep deprivation also produced some strange commentary. Dan's friend Miranda asked him, "You know what you should do with all these paperclips Dan, when this is all done?

"What?"

"You should . . . you should fill up a swimming pool and jump in!"

"What a weird, non sequitur thing to say, Miranda," Dan replied, laughing.

1:30 p.m. A small army of friends came out to a remote farming road to help Dan stretch the chain out to full length. A

KCRA cameraman was present for a follow-up, and Dan's parents had also come out to help. Dan's mom walked next to the crew, looking proud and amused at the same time. "Dan's always had a lot of initiative and leadership skills, and he's wanted to do something like this for a long time," she said. "Of all the things he could be doing in college, this is OK by me."

The unspooling process was slow, frustrating work. Dan soon discovered how flimsy paperclips are as they broke under the slightest tug from the spool. As the crew walked slowly down the road, Dan had to continually order halts to fix broken links as well as tangles and snags, all eating up precious time. The Saran Wrap turned out to have worked reasonably well, but the duct tape was a mistake. It tore the wrap as Dan yanked it off, exposing underlying layers and causing more tangles. At this point, Dan hadn't slept for close to 36 hours, and the frustration of this rather banal detail derailing all his work was starting to take its toll. His friends offered well-intentioned advice and tried to take charge, but this usually made matters worse. Dan's mom wanted him to drink more water. The cameraman asked him distracting interview questions. As a particularly bad tangle halted them, with only about a quarter of the spool unrolled, Dan let out a yell of frustration. With less than an hour to go, he could only unroll as much as possible and hope the people at Guinness would understand.

One week after Dan's attempt at immortality, his website posts the disappointing news: despite having put together almost 40,000 paperclips, he was unable to measure out enough of them

in a straight line to officially break the record. Dan is pinning his hopes on the video that he will send to Guinness, over twenty hours of paperclip assembly footage. He is not optimistic: "The rules are fairly strict, so I would say there's probably only a twenty percent chance they'll accept it." But despite what would seem like a total failure, he speaks cheerfully about his favorite moments of the experience. What started out as one small dream to be the best in the world at something snowballed into a massive undertaking. It came to involve Dan's friends, his family, his school and the local community, and thanks to the Internet, randomly interested people around the globe. A note on his website claims even people in Hawaii saw him on the news. "I think my favorite part was at around 11 p.m. on Friday," he says. "There were almost twenty-five people crammed in my living room and the lights from the news camera were on me. I just never expected it to get that big. I had a lot of fun."

But of course, the million-dollar question is, after losing on a technicality, will he try it again some day? "Well," he laughs, "this paperclip thing is my Mt. Everest. And you don't quit climbing Mt Everest because one of your sherpas dies. But it won't be for a while."

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