

The snowstorm doesn't bother Greg Hamilton. If you grew up in Canada, you probably know how to enjoy cold blizzards rather than be afraid of them. Hamilton accepts the challenge of the piercing wind and heads out again to a park in Toronto to indulge in his favorite pastime. The Canadian stands in the center of a white, deserted field. Then he launches into a strange sequence of carefully measured kicks, hops, and spins. From a distance, you might think you're watching some kind of dance or martial art. Perhaps the falling snow will blur your vision and you won't understand what Hamilton is actually doing. But come closer slowly, and you will hear a rhythmic sound. It is the sound of the small rattan ball that the man partners with in an ancient game, a precursor to soccer. This game is called Chinlone, and Hamilton has dedicated almost his entire conscious life to it.

I first came across Chinlone in 1981. I saw a man playing in the park and I was instantly captivated. The problem is, in Canada there are no Chinlone balls, nor players. So I started making balls out of paper and tape. On top of that, I had no skills with my feet. No one taught us soccer here in the 1950s. My only skills came from martial arts, and there I had to kick people. At first, I thought Chinlone would help me improve as a fighter. And it did. But I fell much more deeply in love with Chinlone than with the martial arts.

At first glance, Chinlone is an extremely unsuitable activity for a man like Hamilton. He is 68 years old. Physical exertion often brings him pain. The Canadian climate is harsh. On top of everything, it's hard to find people with the same passion in his neighborhood. This is no coincidence. Because Chinlone has nothing to do with Canada. Chinlone is the national sport of Myanmar, an Asian country located 13,000 km from Toronto, and Hamilton is its first Western ambassador.

In the mid-80s, I moved to Southeast Asia, to Indonesia. At the first opportunity, I took a trip to Burma, as it was called then. It was a real comedy because I didn't know the local language. The people I wanted to find couldn't speak English. Moreover, I had no skills. I couldn't even play soccer. I did everything in my power. I found a coach, but overall we didn't get along. That experience, however, inspired me. So I took 40 Chinlone balls and left Burma, fascinated and energized.

His first trip to Myanmar changed Hamilton's life and marked the beginning of a unique and exciting adventure. In today's episode, you will hear a story like no other. A story about a man from North America immersed in the mysticism of Eastern culture. About a game whose main goal is not to defeat someone, but to create beauty. And about the pursuit of sharing and mutual support, which makes the world a better place.

I'm Peter Gyuriev, this is Victoria.

KONETSAYA for the royal family.

Today, the game is at the heart of the culture of Myanmar and its population of 54 million people. To play Chinlone, you usually need a team of six. The players form a circle and pass a small rattan ball through the air. One of them stands in the center of the circle and performs a series of varied and difficult kicks. The others return passes and make sure the

ball does not fall to the ground. Most importantly – in Chinlone, there are no winners. The goal is to build a connection with your teammates and perform a beautiful sequence. That's why Chinlone is more than just a game. It is a crossroads between sport, dance, and martial arts.

Chinlone is the traditional sport of Myanmar. It holds an interesting place in the local culture. For centuries, Chinlone has been developed and kept alive by very poor people in the villages. Chinlone is a sport that revolves around building connection and creating beauty as a team. Of course, there are many different playing techniques, but everything comes back to this spirit of giving and taking. This makes Chinlone very different from competitive sports. And let me be clear. I love competition. Just not in areas where there is no need for it, such as, for example, cooking, singing, or dancing.

Chinlone is something like yoga. Yoga doesn't fit into the categories we're used to. It's not exactly a sport, it's not exactly stretching, it's something more. The same with Chinlone.

The pursuit of victory is not Greg Hamilton's thing. From a young age, the Canadian was drawn to martial arts. But it is precisely thanks to them that he learned a lesson that changed his outlook on life.

When I was 6 or 7, I participated in wrestling competitions with other kids. I loved to wrestle, I had a competitive spirit. I remember that I beat some kid in a few seconds and he started crying. My mother was there and told me to apologize to him. Of course, I didn't want to, but she made me. Later, that kid and I became friends. Why am I telling you this story? Because the big lesson I learned from my mother is that if you win, someone else will suffer. And now I love to compete, but I never feel completely happy when I win. So Chinlone turned out to be the perfect game for me.

Chinlone is by no means the only sport of its kind in Southeast Asia. Similar ball games can be found in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. They are all distant relatives of soccer, whose early forms can be traced back to ancient China. But despite some common features, soccer and Chinlone differ fundamentally, not only in their rules but also in their philosophy. Some sports like soccer, boxing, and volleyball are competitive by nature. On the other hand, running, swimming, and figure skating are not inherently competitive. We have turned them into competitions, but they are not so in themselves. That's how I see Chinlone as well. At least for me, the spiritual connection to this game is closer to something like surfing, playing a musical instrument, or making love.

Hamilton's admiration for Chinlone gradually grows into a mission: to reveal this wondrous game to the world, but also to show a different face of Myanmar. Media coverage of this country usually focuses on the authoritarian political regime and the systematic suppression of human rights. That was also the case this year, marked by mass protests after a military coup. More than a thousand people were killed for their participation in the protests, and thousands more were detained by security forces. It is impossible to talk about Myanmar without mentioning these events. Hamilton wants to talk about culture, not politics. At first, however, his enthusiasm met with a series of rejections.

When I went to Myanmar in 1997, I wanted to film a Chinlone team so that other people could appreciate the beauty of this sport. A friend of mine, an American, and I planned to make a short documentary film. But since Myanmar was an almost closed country, we needed permission for the filming equipment. It was very difficult. First, we entered the Ministry of Sport, where all the officials were in longyi [traditional skirt]. When we told them about our idea, they laughed in our faces and didn't believe us. They said, "In your country, you have soccer, you have tennis, you have golf and baseball. Why have you come to Myanmar to study the game of the poorest people?" They told us to get lost. Then we went to the Ministry of Culture. They also threw us out. Chinlone has never been appreciated by the government or the wealthy class of society. That's why it has become that little piece of culture preserved in the villages. When I finally received permission for the film, Chinlone was shown for the first time on national television in Myanmar. That was a huge event for the players themselves, of course. They did not feel loved either by the government or by the rest of society.

Hamilton's film appeared on screen in 2006, 15 years ago. It is called "Mystic Ball" and traces its Canadian hero's path into the world of Chinlone. The documentary won awards at film festivals. Hamilton fulfilled his dream of sharing his passion with an international audience, but he still remembers how hard it was to win the trust of the people in Myanmar.

The beginning was not easy at all. I went to a sports store and found a woman who spoke English. She wrote me a note in the Burmese language. I couldn't understand what she had written, but I took the note and brought it to the house of U Than Gyi, one of the most experienced and famous masters of rattan balls in the area. When I knocked on the door and handed him the note, U Than Gyi looked at me as if I were some kind of spy. In general, people were amazed to see a foreigner from the Western world interested in Chinlone, because even the urban population didn't care about this game. In the end, however, after they saw that my curiosity was authentic, the people were extremely warm and hospitable to me.

Long before the filming process began, Hamilton practiced Chinlone all alone in his favorite park in Toronto. When he meets a real Chinlone coach in Myanmar, the Canadian quickly realizes that his abilities are not particularly impressive.

I think I got good at Chinlone in that haphazard way, because in the beginning, having no skills, I had to chase the ball like crazy. It was a huge challenge. I had no technique or finesse. Well, maybe a little. This went on for many years and I liked it. From 1997 onward, I started going to Myanmar at least once a year and training with the locals. That's how I learned even more about the spirit of the game. At that time in Burma, they had no contact with foreigners. So, during the entire filming and training process, I needed a translator. My first coach was from Anji. He and I didn't get along at all. The trainings were very difficult and didn't work out. It was humiliating for me. At that point, I had already been playing Chinlone for almost 14 years and thought I was good. But I had to forget everything and learn anew. It turns out that everyone is better than me. Even the little boys and girls. I felt like a wild animal. Now that I had found myself in a new environment, I had to be tamed in

order to learn to play with other people. And when you play with others in a circle, there are certain manners and etiquette you must observe. So, it was a great trial for me.

Besides the cultural challenge, Hamilton faces the task of controlling an extremely delicate rattan ball. A skill that Chinlone enthusiasts in Myanmar develop over years.

These balls are incredibly beautiful. The first time I saw such a ball, it reminded me of a beautiful woman. The ball is made of rattan. Rattan belongs to the palm family and grows in the jungle. It can reach several hundred meters in length and is covered in thorns. The locals gather it from the densest parts of the jungle and then process it. The processing method is complex. The rattan is split lengthwise, and the ball is woven. But weaving a ball from rattan is not easy at all. Before you finish the ball, you have to boil it in hot water. Chinlone balls come in various patterns. They usually have between 3 and 9 rattan strips. This ball is small and unusual. It has only two. Most good players use an 8-strip ball. And everyone plays differently depending on the ball itself.

Hamilton compares the Chinlone ball to a musical instrument. In a scene from his documentary, the Canadian films a performance with a flaming ball. The demonstration shows the beauty of Chinlone in all its splendor. A sport turned into art.

To make a flaming ball, you have to thread a wire through its inside. Around that wire, you wrap a piece of cloth soaked in fuel. The rattan ball itself is wetted with water. Then the piece of cloth is lit. That way, the fire burns inside the ball without the ball itself bursting into flames. Once, I joined a team and tried to play with a flaming ball. We were passing the ball, and every time I touched it, the fire went out. The other players did all kinds of tricks with it and the flames never disappeared. That was proof of the gentleness of their touch.

To this day, Hamilton remains just as amazed by the exquisite performances he filmed in Myanmar.

The work on the film took 8 years. The fascination with Chinlone stays with him forever.

I believe that Chinlone allows me to be myself, namely a playful and loving person. This game develops my ability to think clearly and quickly. It helps me experience such happiness and pleasure as I would never have experienced in any sport or in the martial arts. For me, Chinlone is like an incredibly beautiful woman who has gone unnoticed for a long time. When someone finally sees how beautiful this woman is, she will be happy. But her joy will be different from that of those women whom everyone considers beautiful. No. It will be the happiness of one who was previously invisible to the world.

The story of Chinlone continues after a short pause. You will learn how a foreigner participates in a festival in Myanmar, how he goes into a trance, and how his favorite game leads him to new horizons.

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you will help Victoria grow and tell you interesting stories from the world of soccer. And in return, you will receive stickers, postcards, and other special gifts. For more information, see the episode description. And now, back to the mystic ball.

Okay, welcome back. Before the pause, we immersed ourselves in the world of Myanmar's national sport. Now it's time to take you to a traditional Chinlone festival. It was at just such a sports celebration that Canadian documentary filmmaker Greg Hamilton participated, the first foreigner invited to play Chinlone with the best teams in Myanmar.

I felt a strong sense of shame. Of course, I realized that I was not at the level of all those local players. I knew that I was participating only because I was a foreigner who deeply loved the game. On the other hand, I enjoyed the opportunity to play in that environment immensely. It's like you playing with Ronaldinho.

Hamilton steps into the center circle together with his five teammates. The atmosphere is electrifying. The audience reacts to every touch of the rattan ball. Hamilton feels an amazing connection between players and spectators.

It was a life-changing experience. Beyond anything I can describe in words. You cannot imagine how strong the energy is within that festival, and especially in the center circle. The music is loud and intense, and the audience is different from that at any other sporting event. No one ever boos you, because there is no competition. All the spectators hope the players will perform their sequence, and the players give their all to entertain the audience as if it were a world championship. It was an alien experience.

The emotion of participating in a big forum is familiar to many athletes around the world. But Hamilton talks about another deep feeling that we rarely associate with sports. A feeling of trance.

A few years after I started playing Chinlone, something very strange happened. Sometimes I felt like I was going into a trance. Since I wasn't in Myanmar, I had no one to ask to understand this state. Later, while filming the documentary, I interviewed players and mentioned this feeling of trance to them. The moment I mentioned it, they immediately got excited. They said, "Yes, yes, of course, this is what happens while you play Chinlone." I was astonished, because I had no idea that I had experienced something so common for them.

Hamilton believes that one of the reasons for this trance state lies in the nature of Chinlone.

Chinlone differs from competitive sports because they have a hidden goal. To win a world championship, for example. In contrast, Chinlone is self-sufficient. In the same way that making love is self-sufficient. While playing Chinlone, you don't have the feeling of competition or aggression, but of teamwork and connection with other human beings. We humans are like wolves and dolphins. We love to act together, and it satisfies us on an existential level. That's why in Chinlone the two most important things are connection and beauty. The more you delve into these two things, the more deeply you understand human nature.

Many people in Eastern Europe, including myself, grew up with the idea of the Western way of life. At the foundation of this culture is the constant striving for career success, as well as the need to constantly prove yourself and achieve some goals. The life philosophy associated with Chinlone seems completely different. What do you think we can learn from this game?

In my opinion, the ambition for constant success has quite unpleasant effects on society and people. It provokes us to constantly compare and compete in areas where competition is completely unnecessary. One of the benefits of Chinlone is that this rivalry is unnecessary. There's no need to eternally chase some achievements. Of course, every Chinlone player will tell you that they always try to develop their skills and raise their personal level. But this feeling differs from the desire to win as many championships as possible.

And Hamilton's ambition has never been about trophies or awards. He has a simple message – pursue your dreams.

For many people, it is not easy to dedicate their lives to what they truly dream of. Because there is so much pressure from society, from family, from friends. If you do a popular sport like soccer, everyone will say, "Bravo, bravo to you!" If you tell them you play Chinlone, they will look at you in amazement and ask why you're wasting your time. The great test is to discover your own value, your own passion. But passion has two sides. Hitler was also passionate. That's not enough. We must ask ourselves whether our passion makes the world a better place. And in my opinion, Chinlone fulfills this mission. Chinlone makes the world more beautiful. Beauty, of course, exists in every sport. But Chinlone gives something more. Empathy, harmony, and friendship.

Today, the Canadian and the mystic ball continue to dance together in the park. In this game, victory is not important. That is precisely why everyone wins.

When we play Chinlone, we support each other unconditionally. The game is quite intimate, whether there are two, three, or more people in the circle. Thanks to this atmosphere, teammates build a strong bond with each other. I would use the example of love again. When you make love, you feel every little movement of the other person. You tune in to their frequency. You feel whether they are tender or selfish. Chinlone is exactly the same. Chinlone reminds me of the way dogs play. At first, one dog is on top, the other on the bottom, then they switch, no one wins or loses. Both are happy. This is a higher form of play and behavior. In the small park where I play, there is also a dog park. Sometimes I feel the dogs watching me. And I know that they like it because they understand that feeling. They know what I'm talking about. It turns out that I am like a dog that can juggle the ball. And you know what? I am a very happy dog.