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MAIN PICTURE: Billy Stickland/Inpho

Gordon's Tonic

After starting the season in rehab following a shoulder operation, it would be understandable if **Gordon D'Arcy** was depressed. But a trip to India this summer with the charity GOAL has given the Ireland centre a new perspective on life – and rugby

I WONDER WHAT went wrong so that she had to roam the streets' sing the Arctic Monkeys, one of Gordon D'Arcy's favourite bands. But while the new stars of the music world are musing the woes of one woman in their song *When The Sun Goes Down*, D'Arcy witnessed the troubles of hundreds on a trip to Kolkata [formerly known as Calcutta] this summer. The Ireland centre was in the Indian city to see first-hand some of the work being done by GOAL, the humanitarian charity for which he is a patron. One of GOAL's projects was a crèche for the children of prostitutes, but to reach this D'Arcy had to walk through the red-light district and it's an image that has stuck in his mind.

"The people I was with told me to be prepared when we went there because it will be like a guard of honour," explains the 26-year-old. "I didn't really understand what they meant until we got there. This is a place that the tourism industry doesn't want you to see; you have to be a local to know how to get there. There were 300 prostitutes on each side of the road, which was only two or three metres wide, and all were impeccably dressed. Some may have been 20 but the majority were young, say 14. The age of some of the girls was frightening. A kid's only obligation is to have fun and they're not able to."

GOAL's crèche provides food and schooling for the children of prostitutes and D'Arcy is hoping this will help prevent those youngsters also entering the world of prostitution by opening up new opportunities for >







Field events: D'Arcy shares his skills with children in Kolkata

➤ them through education. "The crèche is for the kids of those kids on the street, otherwise they would literally be under the bed while their mum was working. The hope is to break the cycle so those little girls don't work in prostitution."

That's not the only cycle that D'Arcy wants to break; he wants to break the cycle of poverty that affects so many people in Kolkata – poverty disturbingly visible throughout the day and not just when the sun goes down.

Thousands of people live on the side of the streets in the city, but D'Arcy is keen to stress that these aren't the worst off. These people have a source of income, whether it's from owning a stall or working for one. The poorest of the poor in Kolkata live in the slums. Slum inhabitants have no running water, no sewage system and no electricity. As D'Arcy puts it bluntly, "They have nothing."

Toilets were once installed in a slum, but because the people didn't know what they were for they used them to house their pigs. In Kolkata there is a slum in a rubbish dump but D'Arcy was denied permission to view it – again, this is a side of India that officials don't want outsiders to

see. He did, however, visit the Right Track project, funded by GOAL, at another slum. This was an unofficial slum so if the Indian government decided that they wanted to build on the area, the thousands living there would be forced to move on – they have no rights whatsoever.

"Imagine driving up the M1 in England, taking a slip road and

muck. Babies were crawling in it. They'd set up a gully down the middle to clear off some of the rain water – the monsoon was on while we were there – and there was faeces running down it."

The Right Track project means there is now a well so those in the slum can, at least, have clean water and, having been educated on sanitation, they "cherish it and are

morning before changing back to their normal clothes and going to sleep on the streets at the end of the day. And despite their lifestyle, they are still extremely happy kids. "There's one little girl who sleeps on the train tracks," says D'Arcy, "but she's a really vibrant kid."

D'Arcy was travelling in India with Irish tenor Paul Byrom, so he had all the children singing while D'Arcy would take them outside and have them chasing after a rugby ball. "Loads of kids wanted to know why the ball wasn't round but they didn't care if I was rugby player, a footballer or what – they were just happy to see us. They put on a song and dance for us, read poems and gave us handmade chains. They knew things off by heart and you could see how proud they were to do things for us; they wanted to show us what they could do. There was no one putting anyone down either, like there might be over here – there was always rapturous applause.

"I tried to teach them the game of rugby but it was a bit complicated, so I just started booting balls down the field, they'd run and get them, then come back and tackle me. They'd do this for hours and I'd be knackered! I'd sit down but they'd ➤

Diving back in: D'Arcy hopes to be back for Leinster this month



finding 4,500 people living under it," says D'Arcy, as he describes what the slum was like. "When we were there the kids were out playing soccer in the mud and then later on the pigs were out there. In the morning the kids would be out there again, playing in the pigs'

very clean with it". Education is the key throughout Kolkata. While in India, D'Arcy visited several schools and was amazed by everyone's enthusiasm and energy. At some schools street children come in for lessons, changing into their uniforms when they arrive in the

➤ drag me back up for a few more minutes. Everyone wanted to get involved. Some of them would jump back when we first came in because they've been abused in the past. But I had a digital camera and we found that taking photos and showing them was a great way to break down barriers and show the kids that we weren't going to do anything to them. Then you'd walk out with five kids holding on to the fingers of each hand.

"One of the things that struck me when we were driving around was the amount of kids walking to school. Their thirst for education is phenomenal – they're walking miles to school and back in the heat, carrying their books. And for them to speak three or four languages is pretty standard – Bengali, Hindi, English and the local dialect. That's the norm whereas over here to find someone who speaks Irish, English and French is a chance of one out of ten."

The GOAL project that impressed D'Arcy most was in the Sundarbans, a region of Bengal. The Sundarbans are a group of isolated islands at the mouth of the Ganges River, a few hours from Kolkata. Lots of locals migrate to the city because of the extreme poverty in the Sundarbans and the inhospitable conditions – mangrove forests cover the area.

But these people will still end up living in poverty. Kolkata is a city the size of Dublin, but it has a population of 14 and a half million compared to the one and a half million people that live in the Irish capital. Hence the reason so many people live on the streets or in slums. GOAL is trying to persuade the locals to stay in the Sundarbans by making one of the islands a model rural village. There are schools and a medical centre, and the people there are being educated about crop rotation and building houses so they can have a sustainable lifestyle and a brighter future.

"I had preconceived ideas of what the work being done would be like, but this just blew them out of the water," says D'Arcy. "What GOAL is doing there is phenomenal. The aim is to educate people and show them what to do so you can break the cycle and hopefully stop people leaving."

"In the Sundarbans they had all the raw materials in front of them, but didn't know how to do things. So



You too can make a difference!

GOAL is an international humanitarian agency founded by John O'Shea in 1977. It's mission is "to work towards ensuring that the poorest of the poor and the most vulnerable in our world, and those affected by humanitarian crises, have access to the fundamental needs and rights of life – food, water, shelter, medical attention and primary education".

Since its inception 29 years ago, GOAL has spent more than €400m (£272m) on its humanitarian programmes around the world, providing health care, education, water and sanitation. As well as India, GOAL works throughout Africa in countries like Ethiopia, Niger, Sudan and Zimbabwe.

For more info on GOAL or to make a donation, see www.goal.ie



At work and play; D'Arcy on the attack for Ireland and (above) meeting children at GOAL's projects in Kolkata

GOAL & INPHO

GOAL taught a couple of people how to do crop rotation and then they teach a couple of other people and so on. Another thing they didn't know was how to make bricks and raise the foundations of their houses, so you teach two people to do that and so on.

"There are also schemes where people can buy a well together. People are all about helping themselves and helping each other. At no stage was I asked for money, no one had their hand out. Everyone carries themselves with dignity, even the kids, and they're always delighted to see you."

After his summer excursions, which also included a trip to Spain for the Pamplona bull run, D'Arcy has a long season of rugby ahead. He's hoping to return to action with Leinster this month after undergoing a shoulder operation in August and, while he's keen to visit more of GOAL's projects around the globe, with the World Cup next year he realises he won't be able to travel anywhere for quite a while. But there is no doubt his time in India has had a profound effect on him.

"It was a life-changing experience. I'm in a privileged situation in being able to go out with a charity to do something like this. I was thrown in at the deep end and I only want to get more involved in the future, probably more when I've stopped playing."

"Some people come back from a trip like that and overreact, having a go at people for spending money or not eating all their food. But you have to play the hand you're dealt – I won the lottery being born into the family I was born into. As long as it has an effect on you and changes your life for the better, that's the main thing."

"The perspective a trip like that puts on your life is fantastic. I love rugby and wouldn't want to play any less games. But at the end of the day we just chase a ball around a field – there is life after rugby!"

"When I came back to pre-season training and found I had to have the shoulder operation, I was depressed for a few days – you don't want to give anyone else a chance, especially in a year like this. But then I thought about Kolkata and thought how bad are things for me really?"

There's little chance then of D'Arcy becoming, to coin another Arctic Monkeys song, a *Mardy Bum*. 