

# Velenosi hockey clinics in UAE a big hit

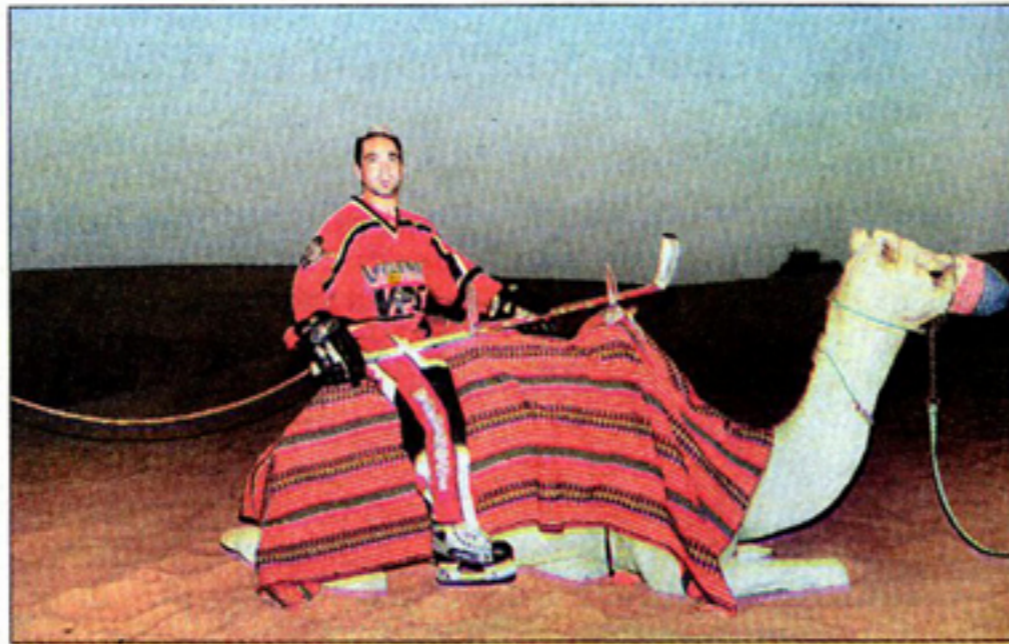
By John KERNAGHAN

Locals reckoned it was a mirage when Sandy Velenosi appeared in a Mideast desert in hockey gear.

It was an oasis stop on a four-wheel-drive safari in the United Arab Emirates and the Hamilton hockey and skating instructor climbed onto a camel for a photo.

"They thought I was some kind of celebrity," said Velenosi, who was in the hot, humid country to run clinics for the Dubai Sandstorms and Abu Dhabi Falcons hockey clubs. The desert encounter, with taped skate blades to protect the camel, was a sidelight to the job of bringing the gospel of hockey to a land thirsting for skills and knowledge.

"It was like bringing a touch of home on the ice to these kids," the East Mountain instructor said.



HAMILTON SPECTATOR FILE PHOTO

**JUST FOR FUN.** Sandy Velenosi poses in his hockey gear on a camel in the desert. The East Mountain instructor is running clinics for two UAE hockey clubs.

"The parents and friends were actually applauding the clinics. They hadn't seen some of the skills or drills before."

Velenosi was invited to the oil-rich UAE, located across the Persian Gulf from Iran, after a visit last spring to see a friend.

"I went to an arena and got talking to Darren Scott of the Sandstorms about all the kids and lack of coaching in the area."

The children of engineers, doctors and pilots from North America and Europe brought their love of hockey to the Mideast, but skills languished.

"What really excited them was the stickhandling drills, the edges in skating and the shooting," said Velenosi, whose mother Marilyn is a pioneer of power skating.

He had rapt audiences in Dubai and Abu Dhabi as kids from those centres, Qatar and Al Ain, showed up for clinics. "There were some good skill levels there and I also coached the coaches in outlining drills they can use. The local kids, about 5 per cent of the players, need more help but were excited

to learn some new stuff."

Scott of the Sandstorms e-mailed Velenosi after the clinics and wrote that "students and staff were really impressed with the instruction and look forward to having you back."

The former pro in-line hockey player and assistant Zach Blashkiw are keen to return even as volunteers. "We were treated like rock stars, staying in villas and going to high-end restaurants, that safari and an incredible flight-simulator experience."

The lasting image was the international brigade of young players wearing flags of their countries on their jerseys and absorbing Canada's game.

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