



“I started running while I was posted in Chicago, over the first winter of my stay there, in 2000. I then ran the Chicago Marathon in October 2001 and have been hooked ever since. I have now run 25 marathons across five continents, shaken hands with a few world champs, and found friends in several non-athletes like myself. I have realized running is a lot like life. My dream is to get 200 million Indians to unleash their potential for health, self-confidence, optimism and competitiveness. I would like everybody to experience the simple joys of running.”

—Rahul Verghese, founder, *Running and Living*.

The Best Foot Forward

By VAIDEHI IYER

As travel and exposure to other lifestyles increases, the practice of running for health and fun is finding a growing and dedicated following in India. The movement is led by running groups started by marathoners who have run abroad, often in the United States. America is home to three of the world's five greatest marathons: New York, Chicago and Boston. London and Berlin host the other two "big five" marathons. Rahul Verghese, alumni of the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, gave up a successful corporate career to start Running and Living, an organization that motivates Indians to run for health. Verghese's columns in *The Hindu*, *Mint* and *The Telegraph* have also motivated many Indians, including this writer, to take up running.

In the United States, distance running is an evolved culture, a tradition that has drawn millions of ordinary folk as well as the famous, such as former presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, who often ran with their Secret Service agents. The New York Road Runners organization, for instance, celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2008, and has a membership of more than 45,000. "However," says Sara Hunninghake, a spokeswoman, "We generally draw more than 300,000 people to our weekly races." The premier event, the ING New York City Marathon, is one of the world's great road races, and draws nearly 105,000 applicants.

"The United States has a solid running tradition now, but it wasn't always that way," notes Hunninghake. "The Africans in

Kenya and Ethiopia are the ones with the long-standing tradition. In the U.S., it was really the running boom of the 1970s that got people interested in the sport. Before the '70s, there wasn't a tradition of fitness running," she says. "The only people out on the streets jogging were boxers like Muhammad Ali, the military to stay in shape, and a handful of other men that people thought were crazy. The running boom came out of a desire people had to improve their fitness. Aging baby boomers who were in their 20s and 30s realized they weren't going to live forever, and they wanted to do something about it. Running was a sport that was accessible, and relatively easy to start participating in."

"Running in the United States, in most of the places I have visited, is very enjoyable," says Prakash Murthy, a software professional who works in New York and lives in Jersey City. He is a founder-member of the Bangalore-based running group RunWalk-India which, among other events, conducts a five-kilometer run every third Sunday in Bangalore's JP Park. In the United States, he notes, "There are dedicated running and hiking trails almost everywhere—within cities, in the suburbs, in state parks. Looking at the many people running in the parks in my neighborhood had a lot to do with my taking up running." His friends and family help sustain RunWalkIndia while he remains active online and times his visits for events.

"People need to be encouraged to run," agrees Vidyuth Sreenivasan, a founder of Chennai Runners, whose members voluntarily maintain a Web site, meet six days a



RAJESH NIRGUDE © AP/WIDE

week to run together, and organize scenic runs on the East Coast Road to Pondicherry. The Chennai Runners' online group has more than 300 members. "We need role models. In India, we need more local events to be organized by competent sports authorities, perhaps one event a month: five-kilometer and 10-kilometer runs are not as daunting as a full marathon."

Sabine Tietge, a German who moved to Bangalore in 1999, founded Runner-GirlsIndia, a women-only running club. "Many women lack the self confidence to put on a pair of running shoes and hit the road; more information and more running clubs will help," she says. Her group was established to create an environment where women runners of all levels can get together to run. It also acts as a support network, providing advice, guidance and encouragement on running-related issues.



AJIT KUMAR



AJIT KUMAR



RICHARD DREW © AP/WWP

Top left: In the 2007 Mumbai Marathon some 500 athletes from Africa and Australia competed alongside thousands of the city's residents.

Above: Runners cross the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge at the start of the New York City Marathon in 2005.

Right: Runners stream off the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge into the Brooklyn borough of New York during the 2003 marathon.

Below, far left: Steven J. White, deputy chief of mission of the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi (left), holds the Special Olympics Flame of Hope during its stopover last December en route to the Special Olympics World Winter Games in the U.S. state of Idaho in February. Indian Special Olympians Ragini Rao and Joginder Bendi escorted the torch.

Below, center: Actor Akshay Kumar and others run with the torch in New Delhi.

Below: Runner Milkha Singh carries the 2006 Commonwealth Games Baton in New Delhi in 2005.



MANISH SWARUP © AP/WWP

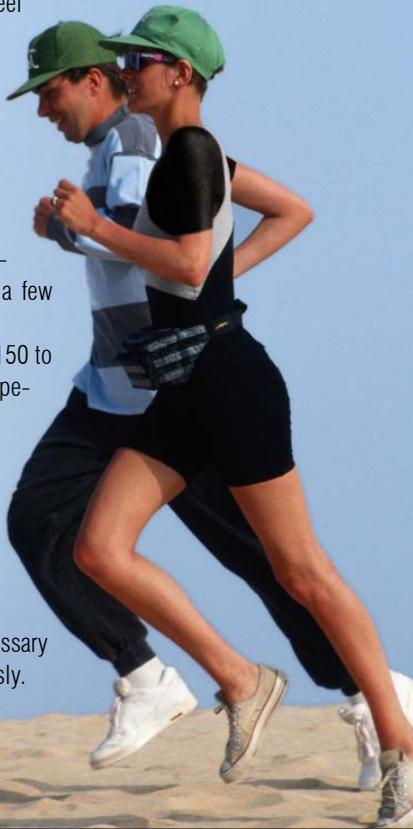


JULIE JACOBSON © AP/WWP

Miles to Go

Safe running tips for beginners from Dr. Kannan Pugazhendi

- Strengthen the muscles of the lower limbs with squats and calf-raising exercises for at least a week before starting to run.
- The impact of running can be reduced by soft heel contact and a gentle roll to the feet, without making any audible sound.
- Stretch the calf muscles, hamstring and the lower back muscles before the start of the run.
- Shoes buffer the impact between the earth and feet. Buy shoes in the evening, as feet swell during the day.
- Do not increase distance suddenly. Let the progression be gradual. Increase the mileage only after a few days of acclimatization.
- Take 500 ml of fluid two hours before the run and 150 to 200 ml every 15 to 20 minutes during the run, especially in hot and humid conditions.
- Stretch thoroughly after the run.
- Add strengthening exercises as a conditioning program two to three days a week.
- Don't wear dark clothes while running under a hot sun as they absorb more heat and raise body temperature.
- Use proper running mechanics and avoid unnecessary movements so that you don't tire yourself needlessly.



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cannot help but feel inspired.”

“The toughest distance to cover is from your bed to your door,” says Anand Bharathi, founder-member of Bangalore’s Runners for Life, which has a paid membership. “It is a challenge all of us face.” Runners for Life also has an active Google group of more than 1,000 runners, and is the force behind events such as the 20-kilometer corporate relay named Urban Stampede. Other marathons organized include the ultra marathon, which covers distances of more than 42.2 kilometers.

The greatest challenge to running is overcoming self-denial, and accepting that modern lifestyles are creating health problems. Misconceptions also slow down the movement for running. Says Dr. Kannan Pugazhendi, director of the Sports Medicine Center at the Young Men’s Christian Association and the Sports Performance Assessment Rehabilitation Research Counseling Institute in Chennai: “There are many common myths about running. People believe it’s not safe, that walking is as good as running, that running will wear out the knees and cause osteoarthritis, that running on toes is the best, or even that running alone is enough exercise. None of this is true.” Pugazhendi, a distance runner who has

RunnerGirlsIndia organizes fortnightly women-only runs in Bangalore. Chapters in other cities are being planned, as are regular training courses, such as the ‘Couch to 5K’ to help women who want to start running.

Indeed, encouragement is a very strong motivation. “In the New York Marathon, the crowd support is phenomenal,” says Rajesh Vetcha, core team member of Hyderabad Runners, which organized the city’s first marathon in August 2008 and won accolades for doing a fine job of it. “I learnt a lot from the experience of running [the NYC Marathon], from the signages,

Courtesy: Prakash Murthy, Run/WalkIndia



Children run in an event in Bangalore.

For more information:

Running and Living

<http://www.runningandliving.com/>

New York Road Runners

<http://www.nyrr.org/>

Chennai Runners

<http://www.chennai.runners.com/>

Runners For Life

<http://runnersforlife.com/>

the way administrative authorities helped, the way runners played a key role in organizing the event. The route goes through all the five boroughs of the city. The weather is great and the respect you win every step of the way is the highest reward. Just run in Central Park and you

accompanied several Indian sports delegations abroad and designed training programs for police personnel, military cadets and classical dancers, follows a holistic approach to physiotherapy and sports medicine by combining yoga, *pranic* healing and martial arts with his medical knowledge. He says, “Running safely is the key, and it is possible to do so by

following a few sensible rules.” (See box.)

Runners prove this by example. “Running, for me, is more than just running, it’s my life, my first love,” says ultramarathoner and one of the few musculoskeletal experts in India, Dr. Rajat Chauhan. Formerly head of the department of sports and exercise medicine in Manipal Hospital, Bangalore, he is a physician representative for several sports teams, and now founder-director of Back2Fitness, a health care provider for injury- and pain-free active lifestyles. “I moved back to India a couple of years ago. I want to bring a running revolution in the country by getting inactive people to get moving, no matter what distance is covered in how much time, as long as they put in the effort,” he says.

The most wonderful thing about running is that it allows its practitioners to literally set their own pace. “I was a heavy smoker. I was too slow. I still am. I always thought I was running barely a little more

than my walking speed and much slower than a lot of walkers,” says S. Rajesh, a Chennai-based software professional. “But then I stumbled upon John ‘The Penguin’ Bingham’s articles (www.runnersworld.com is a superb resource). And I slowly improved. Since then, I have become a member of the Chennai Runners group and have finished four half marathons. In the process, the best thing that happened in my life, health-wise, was that I quit smoking.”

Running is also an egalitarian and friendly sport. Camaraderie gives as much impetus to tiring feet as determination. At the Hong Kong Marathon in February 2008, two North Korean women runners finished holding hands. On my first run with the Chennai Runners last summer, a publishing company executive I had never met until that morning helped me, an overweight, nudging-40 mother of two, finish running four kilometers at a stretch, then my person-

al best. K.P. Suresh, now a friend, kept pace with my sluggish steps and urged me to finish while dishing out splendid anecdotes on running and weight loss.

“Just take it one step at a time,” signs off the trim and fit Sabine Tietge. “I was 20 kilos overweight just over two years ago and could not even run one minute! So if I can do it, so can you!” Indeed, the power of change rests in our own feet.



Vaidehi Iyer is a journalist and editor based in Chennai.



Right: Spectators cheer runners in the ING New York City Marathon in 2008.

Courtesy of New York Road Runners