

Ladakh Marathon – Short of Breath and Full of Pride

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During my visit to Leh in 2017, I saw Ladakh Marathon banners all over the city screaming – “For the Resilient and the Brave”. Having already run over a dozen half marathons (21.097 kms for the uninitiated) in Delhi, I was still skeptical, looking longingly at the banners, if I would ever be brave and resilient enough to run this one – the highest and amongst the toughest marathons in the world in climate that tests the limits of human endurance.

The picture of that banner against the pristine mystical brown barren mountains and a clear azure sky stayed in my mind and would not let me be at peace until, on an impulse I decided to come back the next year and run the half marathon with the realisation at the back of mind that even walking 500 metres in its rarefied air was leaving me gasping for breath; and to add to that, low oxygen levels in the high altitude region were playing havoc with my lungs. While it was alright to get all romantic and sentimental about the run, it demanded focused training and strict discipline to complete the distance in an honourable time and not just finish it somehow. To run at 11500 ft is not the stuff for the faint hearted but the lure of the Himalayas was too great to resist.

Being a member of a prominent running club in Delhi came as a blessing as 25 runners from our club had signed up for the Ladakh Marathon (to be held on 09 Sep 2018 and being organised by RIMO expeditions supported by the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council) that helped us train together and keep us focused. We were training five days in a week throwing in strength training, interval training, Fartlek, hill repetitions and Sunday long distance runs. But we soon realised that no amount of training could prepare us for the unique climatic conditions that awaited us at Leh.

Unlike running anywhere else in India, the Ladakh Marathon requires you to arrive in Leh at least a week in advance to acclimatise for the race day. Leaving two small kids in the expert care of my ever-supportive husband, I landed at Leh on 03 Sep 2018 and was duly handed over a long list of things “Not to be done” at Leh by the Nursing Assistant (NA). The popular adage “Don’t be a Gama in the Land of Lama” was heard more number of times than “Jullay” (the customary greeting of the locals). 03 and 04 Sep 2018 were complete rest days, much to my chagrin as I could see the most beautiful landscapes offering stunning vistas of mountains, rivers and valleys from the large windows of my room but couldn’t venture out; well the incorrigible me did try and after straying for 400-500 metres came right back to the room feeling breathless with the NA standing there with the blood pressure measuring machine and “I told you so” look on his face.

With my health parameters at their best behaviour, I went for a six km slow jog the morning of 05 Sep to test the waters. Feeling exhilarated at surviving three km of steep climb on my way back, I couldn’t help but look at the rugged Himalayas all around and ask for their blessings to let me achieve what I had sought out to. I couldn’t find any official record, but according to some in the Ladakh Marathon management, every year 10-15 people suffer cardiac arrest during the run. Next day again I attempted a five km jog and was pleasantly surprised at how well my body was acclimatising to the climate. With that sorted, and not the one to be confined to the four walls, I went on a day’s trip to Khardungla Pass (40 km from the Leh City), which at 18380 ft is the world’s highest motorable pass and it fitted perfectly in my acclimatisation plan.

With just two days to go before the final run, and a lot of local sight-seeing that remained to be done, I made one last effort at running a 12 km stretch on 07th morning involving steep down and uphill climbs as we were sure to encounter on the final route. Huffing and puffing all the way, I, nevertheless, felt on top of the world on having completed the route when it dawned on me that a day later I would be expected to run almost double the distance and at that moment it wasn’t the most exciting of the thoughts.

Let me not sound so dull to make the readers think that all I did was practice, in the run up to the D Day. We, as a group are proud of having generously contributed to the local Leh economy by the way of shopping and binging on the local food every single day, visiting the places of interest around the Leh City and making some of the most cherishable memories in that one week.

I don't think any one of us in my group slept the night of 08th Sep as the butterflies in the tummy won't let us (this, in fact, is true of every race irrespective of the place. It's the nervous energy before the big day). As I lay on my bed, wide awake, twiddling my thumbs in nervous anticipation and childlike excitement, I drifted back to all those years in my past which had somehow shaped me and brought me to this day...

Born to an Army officer father, I am the eldest of the three sisters my parents raised to be educated, self-confident, financially independent girls not scared to take challenges by the horns. Inspired by my father's magnetic persona, I knew I had to become an Army officer myself. With confidence and attitude in my kitty and no Plan B in life I appeared and passed the Services Selection Board (SSB) and found myself undergoing the toughest six months at the Officers Training Academy, Chennai.

I married an Army Officer and my home run in uniform lasted a few years till God decided to throw a bouncer when we were blessed with a baby girl born with genetic disorder coupled with, let's just say, some complications in her little heart that needed corrective surgery at the earliest. My little fighter survived that day to bring us immense happiness to this day. I left the Army soon after as there was another arduous journey I had to make but this time I had an excellent teacher with me – my daughter. Together we have grown to be wiser people with her giving me daily lessons on subjects that no university teaches – and these are the gems that I have collected over last 13 years and I don them with utmost pride.

In all these challenges what kept me going was my undying passion for running. I call it a passion and not a hobby as hobby is something you do when you are free or feel like it, while passion is something you are committed to, irrespective of the environment

around. Ever since I can remember, I have been running, initially by order, thanks to a discipline-obsessed father, till it became a way of life. Life took a hit with my daughter's diagnosis and what followed afterwards, but I did not stop running. Then arrived my son and I had two in my lap but I ran. My husband keeps getting posted to non-family stations but I continue to run. As if I didn't have enough on my plate already, I also picked up a job five years back but I have continued to run no matter what. I have been deeply influenced by an African proverb which goes like this *"Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up, it knows it must outrun the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning in Africa, a lion wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the slowest gazelle or it will starve. It doesn't matter whether you are the lion or a gazelle, when the sun comes up, you'd better be running"*. So some days I am a lion all hungry and raring to go and most days I am a gazelle just trying to survive but I would be found running any given day.

I drifted off to sleep on that night with all those years behind me wafting gently in my mind, thinking of three people back home who make up my world and without whose unconditional support I would not have been there. And I think I dreamt of that blue banner reading "for the Resilient and the Brave" growing closer and bigger as I saw myself in that dream lumbering towards the finish line.

The next morning, like soldiers readying to go into battle, we were all geared up in our running rigs; hydration and energy bars in our pockets; timed bibs preciously pinned to our t-shirts; caps and shades to add to the glamour and we were ready to be flagged off at 0630 in the morning for the race of our lives. The weather was perfect with cotton soft clouds wafting in the blue sky and a gentle breeze on our faces, the mountains stood majestically smirking at our audacity of thinking we were there to tame them while the truth was that our lives were in their hands. The view in front of us was breathtaking and I, as I stood at the start line, was one of the only 2200 odd people participating in the race out of billions in our country; the thought itself was elevating but the 21.097 kms had yet to be tackled.

There we were, nearly 2200 people - red cheeked, climate hardened Ladakhi kids running in their rudimentary shoes and yet faster than us, young people from all over the country bustling with energy, middle aged but not quite ready to quit on their passions, veterans giving a serious complex to all the previous categories – all with our own demons and fears and a determination to conquer them all.

We were still wishing each other good luck and taking pre-run pictures when at precisely 0630 hours we were flagged off. The strategy of the run was to go full throttle downhill and level ground to make up for the time we would eventually lose during the uphill climbs. It had seemed so logical and sorted at the time till we actually started running and realised it wasn't a land of strategies but surrender. To go along with the rhythm of the route, keeping heart rate and hydration under check, and enjoying the run became the strategy. The winding roads, sun kissed mountain slopes, energy of the race, occasional views of monasteries perched on hill tops and the photographers stationed strategically through the route kept me blissfully unaware of what was happening to my breathing pattern.



Ladakh Marathon : Feels like running in the heavens

At 12 km mark I started to feel the heat when I realised I had stopped noticing the scenery around me and was looking down at the road labouring at each step and conscious of how heavily I

had started breathing. I had to do something to take my mind off it and so I started looking around for inspiration and I did get some as I saw few runners around me develop shallow breathing but like brave hearts carried on regardless with some puffing on the inhaler and on the other hand a few were running barefoot. Thankfully the Ladakh Marathon organisers had ample medical facilities and ambulance en route to cater for any emergency. That looked after my next five kilometres. At 17 km mark, with just 4 km remaining to the finish line, I thought it was now a cake walk; but destiny had different ideas. There in front of me, the very road I had become good friends with until now, betrayed me and had started to climb gradually till it attained a perfect 40 degree incline which it maintained for the next 3.5 km. What a dampener it was towards the end of the race. I tried, but it was impossible for me to keep running uphill on that incline. So I walked the whole uphill through. The only thing that prevented me from bashing myself up for walking was the fact that every other runner on that climb till my eyes could see, was walking it. Admittedly, secretly I quite enjoyed it as going against the elements then was unthinkable.

At the end of the dreaded climb, that had sapped me completely and added an extra 20-25 minutes to my usual time, the blessed sight of a large blue banner declaring "Finish Line" appeared out of nowhere less than a kilometre away sending all fellow runners into mad frenzy of nearly having done it. But rest assured it wasn't going to end so smoothly. Even though the last 600-700 metres were nearly flat ground, my legs simply refused to move. Never before have I had to literally instruct and reprimand my legs to move and transport me magically to the brighter side of the finish line. The more I ran towards the finish line, the farther it kept going. True to its essence, Leh made me struggle to account for the last of the milimetres and when it was finally over, there was no mad jumping or thumping of the chest, but moist eyes looking at the sky saying a silent little prayer of thanks. The cut off time was 3 hours 45 minutes and I finished the race in 2 hours 40 minutes stading at 690th position. All the members of my running group from Delhi did exceedingly well with Gayatri making it to the podium Gold with an unbelievable timing of 2 hours 06 minutes. I have already decided to go back again in 2019 and better my timings by training harder.

In hindsight though, even after this little mental victory under my belt, I would like to believe I am an average person with no great achievements to my credit. I had to give up a lot to accommodate various circumstances and challenges thrown at me but I believe everyone is fighting his/her own battle and most of us are doing a great job at winning them. In my opinion, every person has a passion, which is not just a hobby and to feed and nurture that passion is one's own moral responsibility. Aside from managing house and family, first and foremost, one is accountable to his/her own self. We owe it to ourselves to pursue our passions. How else would we motivate our children and people around us? What the flight crew say about wearing your own mask before you help others is very true. At the cost of sounding all preachy, I would say that life is so much more than just one long lazy plod from cradle to grave. My coach always says the day I feel I can't take anymore.....

“It hurts now but one day it will be your warm-up”



Ladakh Marathon Finisher Medal : Prized Possession

©Major Sonali Gupta (Retd) was commissioned into Army Ordnance Corps (AOC) and served the Indian Army from 1999 to 2006. Presently, she is Assistant Editor at USI of India.

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