

Champa's (and Chhotu's) London Marathon 2008

Well, we completed the marathon & despite all the aches & pains, it was an absolutely fantastic day for both myself and my husband, Chhotu.

My story began shortly before my fortieth birthday - it was a family joke that my husband who has always been a very keen sportsman was trying to get me fit for the big 40.

I started off with jogging some of the time and walking most of it - but give Chhotu credit that he always stayed with me & was very encouraging. The day that I jogged for the full distance (including a steep hill), there was a great sense of achievement.

Exercise made me feel good and in addition because we used to go out early in the morning before leaving for work there was a great kick-start to the day. Within a few months we were regularly jogging 3 times a week and in 2001 I felt brave enough to make my first attempt at trying for a long distance run.

I, therefore, applied to run in the Kodak Harrow half-marathon (not quite ready for the full marathon). The training in this instance was quite challenging as I was running by myself and when you have run past the same tree for the twelfth time and know that more must follow, it can get quite daunting.

However, I persevered and got myself to the start line. It was a punishing run, especially when I saw that most people were over-taking me within the first few hundred yards however as time went this situation changed because the ones who had put their all into the first part of the race were finding it tough going and I found myself giving them words of encouragement. The finish line found me completing my first ever half-marathon in 2hr & 19 mins and I also raised £350 which was donated to the school for handicapped children that our precious daughter, Nimisha, had attended. This was especially appropriate as 2001 would have been her 21st birthday and I felt that we celebrated it in a very special way.

Having done this I had the ambition to try running in the London Marathon. I therefore started applying in the autumn of 2002 for my own ballot place and this time Chhotu too felt that it was an achievement worth trying for.

As you know it is a bit of a lottery - some people are successful on their first application, others have to keep on trying - there was one consolation however in that the rules say that after being declined consecutively for five years you do get an automatic placement for the sixth year. We could have tried for a charity place but most of them expect a minimum of £1000.00-£1500.00 each in donation for a placement, which for the both of us would have been very hard to raise as we had decided that as far as possible we did want to run the London Marathon together.

We persevered and eventually in 2007 Chhotu won a ballot place but I was declined yet again. The rules also allow you to postpone your place to the following year encouragement as we knew that there would be an automatic entry for me in 2008, despite my protests, Chhotu felt this was the best course to take. Well I got my acceptance letter in the winter of 2007 for the following year - the London Marathon of 2008 was to take place on Sunday, 13th April - and you would think I had won the lottery, I felt so elated.

This was when the hard work started as we trained to build up our stamina for the grueling 26.2 mile run. It wasn't easy but little by little we were getting there and on the first of January, 2008, ran the half marathon distance of 13.1 miles - we just had to double this up now!!

There followed 3 months of rigorous training and always the thought, what if anything goes wrong/what if one of us gets injured during training, especially critical for Chhotu would not be able to take his ballot place forward to another year. Despite all this, the big day finally approached and during the final week we were once again very busy as there was the registration at the London Excell Centre, collection of official running numbers, the chips for our shoes so that an official time could be recorded for our running time, visiting the reception for our chosen charity, making friends & family aware of this and raising funds and of course the training to be fitted in as well.

We had chosen the charity 'I Can' which helps children to communicate as I feel that every child has a right to this and what better statement than for a handicapped child to be able to say, 'I Can'.

Unfortunately, one week before the marathon I had a touch of flu and really felt that after all the hard work I was not going to be able to make it on the day but once again got a lot of encouragement from Chhotu, who I think had more faith in me than I did. Sunday, 13th of April, turned out to be a cold blustery morning and saw us leaving home at 6.30am to be at Bexleyheath for the start of the Marathon at 9.00 am and our particular group at 9.45 am. We finally set off and I find it hard even now to put into words our feelings of exhilaration as we jogged on the streets of South London to the accompaniment of applause and words of encouragement from the wonderful people who had braved the bad weather to come and watch us.

As forty thousand people ran the streets of London all you could hear was the pounding of their feet on the tarmac and as we clocked up the miles as shown by the mileage markers there was a wonderful feeling of participation and belonging to an elite group.

After a grueling 5.30 hours of running in the rain, sleet, wind, cold and accompanied by pain (I had suffered a groin injury at the half way point which got worse with every step) we finally crossed the finishing line. The sense of achievement is indescribable - we had just finished one of the world's best known marathons and crossed the finish line still standing on our own two feet and we had done it together as a dedication to the memory of our lovely daughter – 2008 is the twentieth anniversary of her death and this was a particularly appropriate way to remember her.

My ambition had also finally been realized and in doing so I had also learnt that, where there is a will, there is always a way. Along the way we also collected donations for a very worthy cause - the final total was almost £1400.00 thanks to the generosity of a lot of very kind people.

We collected our finisher's medals and our kit and there followed a difficult journey home - I now know what people mean when they say their legs turned to jelly as standing up got more and more difficult.

All I can now say is that we both had an absolutely wonderful day and I for one would love to be able to do it all over again.

It was not easy, but if you are itching to do something challenging then wishing for it is not going to get you there. Resolve. Put in the necessary work and stay with it. I didn't break any records, the knowledge that I challenged myself and won is enough of a tonic to last a life time – or at least until the next time!!! And to be able to say, "I CAN" and I am sure You Can as well.

Champa Soma
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