



MARATHONING: THE TRIUMPH OF DESIRE OVER REASON

– RAMESH PONNUSWAMI

It was around 20 years back, when this Coimbatore man in a spate of frustration just put on his shoes and ran for 20 minutes. Not many realized the significance this move would have on Coimbatore's running circuit then, not even Ramesh Ponnuswami – Coimbatore's Marathon man. Since then, the man has personally run more than 50 half marathons and 15 full marathons across 26 countries and five continents, and made the Coimbatore marathon one of the most looked forward to event in the city's sports calendar.

Ramesh, who was based in Australia, between 1995 and 2001, was getting frustrated because he was not able to schedule and fit in a workout every day. Being involved in sports since school and university he had been playing squash for a few years, but since his job required him to travel frequently, his squash sessions was taking a hit. "So, one morning during one of my travels, I suddenly decided to take a run," he recalls. "I slowly increased my timing from 20 minutes to 25 minutes and eventually

45 minutes. "I was so smitten by running that I eventually stopped playing squash and moved to running altogether".

The fitness enthusiast who used to take a 40 to 45 minutes run everyday with his colleague, one day came across his wife, Camille, who had just had a baby but was practising for a marathon. "I was surprised when she said she was practicing for a 20 km long run. I was surprised, because I was running based on time and did not even know the distance of my run. I also became inspired, thinking if she can run so much after just delivering a baby, why can't I," he says. Ramesh ran his first organized half marathon in 2001 in Townsville, a small coastal town in Queensland.

That year began Ramesh's journey into marathons, one that he still runs. "I bought books and read up on the internet on how to train for a marathon and move to distance-based running rather than timing-based running," he said. He managed to run

16 km before the marathon and completed his first half marathon taking 2 hours and 22 minutes.

Ramesh believes that running is a mood alleviating experience, and when you wake up in the morning and run, it gives you the time to think and plot. It is almost like meditation in motion. "After all it gives you a great sense of accomplishment, because you're becoming fit compared to others sitting in the couch or sleeping in," he adds.

In 2001, Ramesh moved to India, taking up a job with the Murugappa Group, managing their sugar factories in Pudukottai, Karur and Aranthangi. He did not only manage to continue to his runs but managed to motivate others to join his runs. "I initially began running by myself, but slowly got the HR to map the fitness level of colleagues and used that to sensitize them on importance of getting fit. After constant interactions with them, they agreed to attend walking meets, where they would take a brisk walk for 30 to 45 minutes. Even the conservative chief engineer, who never wore shorts in his life, began turning up and it began a habit," he says.

However, it was in 2004 when Ramesh moved to Chennai, that he got back into the marathon circuit. He again began running by himself and in 2006 he got introduced to Chennai Runners, and connected with them. "I soon began running with them, setting targets for myself and participated in my full marathon in Singapore in 2006 December and was a midnight marathon," says Ramesh. He then went on to participate in a half marathon in Chennai in 2008 and then one in Hyderabad. In 2011 Ramesh moved to Coimbatore. He specifically chose to stay in Race Course, so he can step out of his house and start running immediately. "I however remained part of Chennai runners, and used to participate in weekend short runs in East Coast Road. We then organized a marathon in Chennai in 2012 sponsored by Wipro, by runners and for runners," he recalls.

Ramesh decided to start a running group in Coimbatore. He started a small Facebook group with just four people who were members and would meet to run early in the morning. It slowly grew to 20-30 people. It was after everyone saw an extremely successful Chennai



marathon, that Coimbatore Cancer Foundation and its head Dr Balaji reached out to Ramesh, to help organize a similar event in Coimbatore, to raise awareness on the foundation's activities and raise funds.

Ramesh was clear that the marathon should not be a one-off event, it should be broad-based attracting walkers and runners, people from all strata of society and across age groups and the entire event should be off world standard, and something Coimbatore has never experienced before. "The organisers initially said they expected 2,500 participants, but I was adamant that we should have at least 5,000 participants," he recalled. He then went about designing and architecting the route and brought in a professional agency to run it. The very first edition of the event in the city in 2013 saw 8,400 people participating. He also ensured that the event sponsors aligned with the policy of fitness, leaving out pharmaceutical companies, junk food etc.

In five years, the Coimbatore marathon has doubled in size, literally. In 2019, 16,000 people ran the marathon. This is despite the organisers closing the registrations a month earlier. "In the first year, we did massive canvassing by distributing leaflets across the city, in colleges, playgrounds and parks with just regular walkers. We said that they could get a t-shirt, medal and breakfast if they run or walk at least 5 km, and then told them about the registration fee. When people balked at having to pay and run, we told them it was a contribution for a good cause and could get a tax benefit on it," said Ramesh. Ramesh says he expects the number of runners

at the Coimbatore Marathon to go up to 20,000 soon. "The numbers may already reach 20,000 if we don't close the registrations, but we want to grow and stabilize instead of ramping up too soon," he said.

What makes Ramesh even more proud is that the runners are graduating in terms of the races they participate in. "People who walked the first time were running the next time. People who did 5 k the first year, registered for the 10 k the next year and even our half marathon registrations have gone up. It is an addictive activity and people who complete it once start challenging themselves," he said. Over 20% of the participants are also women. More than just the marathons, the man is mainly credited for making running a culture and habit in the city. "Initially all marathon trainers were turning up at race course and Avinashi Road for training. Now we have groups of runners in every area like Saravanampatti, Kalapatti, Vilankurichi, Trichy Road, so people don't have to waste time reaching Race Course and then start running. They can run in their own neighbourhood," he says.

Ramesh's dream is to one day increase the number of participants to 50,000 and participate in the marathon too. "Being the race director, I am the one who coordinates with the police, ambulances and other arrangements on the day, so I have not been able to participate. But maybe some day..." he says with a smile. Spend an hour with this man & you realise "A marathon is hundreds of miles. The finish is the last 26.2"