

# The Ultra Experience of a non-Athlete

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The title of this article gives away a lot about what I am going to say in the following paragraphs. This is the story of how an underdog embarks upon a heroic journey - a journey on which he is guided by a lovable teacher but one that is nevertheless full of challenges and mean villains with weird laughs who have nothing else better to do than create obstacles for our hero. This is the story of how our hero fights on in the face of adversity and finds a place among the champions.

If I have not completely lost you by this point then let me stop flattering myself and begin telling the *real* story, which I assure you, would be nowhere as cinematic as the preceding paragraph (but perhaps for a character whom I would like to portray as a conniving evildoer). The story I am going to tell is of how I came to participate in the IITK Golden Jubilee Ultramarathon. All of this started with a mail that was sent out to campus residents late October last year. The mail, one of many that announced Golden Jubilee events, was religiously marked as spam by my personal filter. However for some strange reason I ended up opening that mail and actually reading it.

The mail announced an ultra marathon for campus residents and alumni - which was nothing new - there had been long distance walks and half-marathons earlier that year. What was different about this was the announcement of a training program directed at beginners. This is what caught my eye - I had never run in my life - at least never more than a kilometer and yet this program promised to get me in shape for a 50 km run. Seeing that I had nothing to lose, I signed up.

We were soon sent our training schedules and had our first training session on the first of November. This is when I met two of the three persons who would play crucial roles in my training - Prof. Madhav Ranganathan and Vivek Sangwan - my Mom (Mrs. Subhra Kar) being the third one. I was just another starry-eyed enthusiast who was elated at being able to complete a 2-km run that day - blissfully oblivious of the double-digit ordeals that lay ahead. All of us asked questions to Prof. Madhav and Vivek who were going to coach us for the rest of the program

and dispersed. This was the beginning of a training program that was to last almost four months.

I had to wait till we started running more than 10 kms before the non-triviality of long distance running hit me. Till then, it was mostly getting up at 6 am on Sunday mornings that was the hardest part. I rapidly discovered that I was ill-equipped to run long distances at even a moderate pace. So I started making amateurish attempts at interval training. The efforts paid off - my stamina increased and I soon found myself to be one of the fastest in the training group. All was going well until the day we ran 20 kms - this was the day I suffered my first torn hip flexor (I was to suffer another one later).

This is where the evil Dr. Who makes an entry in our story. This person is a real life doctor (whom I shall not identify) and his misdiagnoses of my condition (as a pulled quadricep) and repeated refusals to refer me to a physiotherapist cost me two weeks of training. I eventually managed to get a referral to a physiotherapist and made a full recovery within another couple of weeks. The support I got from my Mom during this period was unbelievable and she kept sending me tips and suggestions (and more importantly goodies like running gear and eatables) throughout the program.

Four months of training later came the day of the ultramarathon. I was both excited as well as apprehensive about the race as I was competing in a sporting event after quite some time. I was particularly excited about the prospect of having hordes of people cheering us during the race (although I was to be disappointed later by the low turnout of spectators). A gunshot at 6:15 am started off the race and all of us went off on our respective courses.

Now my goal for this ultramarathon was not so much to get a podium finish as to match some of the existing 50K timings. The only major Indian ultramarathon I knew of was the Bangalore Ultra and the 2009 timing for the 50K run was 4:33:16 (it was 4:17:40 in 2008). This seemed like something I could manage. It only required me to run at an average of around 5 and a half minutes to a kilometer which I

was easily able to do during the training runs.

The first few 10km laps went really well and I was getting an average of less than 5 minutes to a kilometer. My joy knew no bounds since I thought I would be able to maintain this over the entire run - I was thoroughly mistaken. The last two laps took almost 6 minutes to a kilometer. I was running with Vivek almost all the time which was good since we kept encouraging each other but I could see both of us tiring up and slowing down. After completing the five 10km laps, we headed for a last 400m lap at the institute sports ground.

This is where the two of us got competitive and decided to sprint the last 200m or so. I lost the sprint by about 10 seconds but the rush I got was amazing - plus the crowd went wild which was a huge boost. I found that the ultra had been won by Mr Vishwanathan Jeyaram who clocked 4:19:16. I myself had clocked 4:27:51 which meant that I had bettered the 2009 Bangalore Ultra timing (although not the 2008 one).

When I look back at the whole training program and the race, I feel glad that I took up the program and saw it through. I am a much fitter person today and although I have no plans of competing in long distance events rightaway, I wish to continue running. This experience has brought in me a newfound respect for athletes who devote not just their bodies but also their minds and souls to their sport.

I would be very happy if the IITK community takes up running in larger numbers (there should atleast be more people cheering the participants in future events). I benefited immensely from this experience and would like to express my gratitude to Prof. Madhav for his guidance, Vivek for his support throughout the program and during the race and my Mom for begin a constant source of inspiration.