

In the race, technology provides a sporting chance at winning

Want to run in the Mumbai Marathon in January 2008? Out of shape, but not yet short of enthusiasm, Charles Assisi seeks motivation—and a little coaching—on the World Wide Web

San Diego is the kind of place where it's easy to fall in love. Everybody looks beautiful. Which is perhaps why everybody in San Diego takes working out very seriously. Not surprisingly, it has an awesome reputation of being the healthiest county in the United States. Having said that, it is also the kind of place where it is hopelessly easy to feel out of place if you aren't beautiful. In some ways, that's a good thing. It compels you to not just start thinking of getting into shape, but doing something about it.

In my case, the thought crept into my head on a short trip to the county a few months ago. It eventually translated into my taking up running as a long term hobby when I got back to Mumbai. But the truth is this: a few days after running randomly in Mumbai, visions of San Diego and its beautiful people start receding from your mind. The aches and soreness in your joints start taking over. Not to forget the drudgery of waking up every morning after a late night at work. To keep at it, you need motivation. I turned to the World Wide Web.

Some amount of basic reading was all I needed to figure out that to keep running, I need a goal. And goals like looking good don't work for most people because it is an intangible variable that cannot be measured. What you need is a tangible goal that can be measured. With some friendly prodding from a few online groups I had signed up for, I settled on the Mumbai Marathon in January 2008.

Now, it's one thing wanting to run the marathon. It's another altogether training to run for 42 kilometres. Clearly, I did not have the wherewithal to do it. What I needed was a coach. I turned, yet again, to the World Wide Web to look for somebody in Mumbai who'd be willing to work on me. What I ended up instead was on websites of people that are inarguably some of the most experienced runners on this planet.

Many of them have participated in the Olympics; some hold world records; yet others are authors of best selling books on fitness. After trawling through a few dozen profiles, I signed up with Pat Carroll (www.patcarroll.com.au). One of Australia's most versatile distance runners ever, he represented Australia 18 times, holds many records and coaches runners of all kinds both online and in his native Brisbane.

Subsequent to assessing my fitness levels after I answered a series of questions he emailed me, Pat suggested I drop the idea of running the full marathon and settle for a 26 week programme that would see me through the half marathon. I didn't need much convincing. I paid and signed up with him.

A few days later, Pat emailed me a spreadsheet that articulated in great detail a programme I could follow. It involved running four days a week. I am a report with great pride now that when I started a few weeks ago, I could barely run three minutes without running out of breath. I'm doing 45 minutes now and a few days from now will be able to run flat out for an hour. In the meantime, I keep Pat updated on my progress though email; he responds to every question I have within 24 hours; and I must confess I am happy. Of course, there was this little patch when I chickened out of running for a few days. But I'm back. And trust me on this one. There is some pleasure you get out of telling friends you've got an Australian coach. Makes you feel like one of those rock star Indian cricketers.

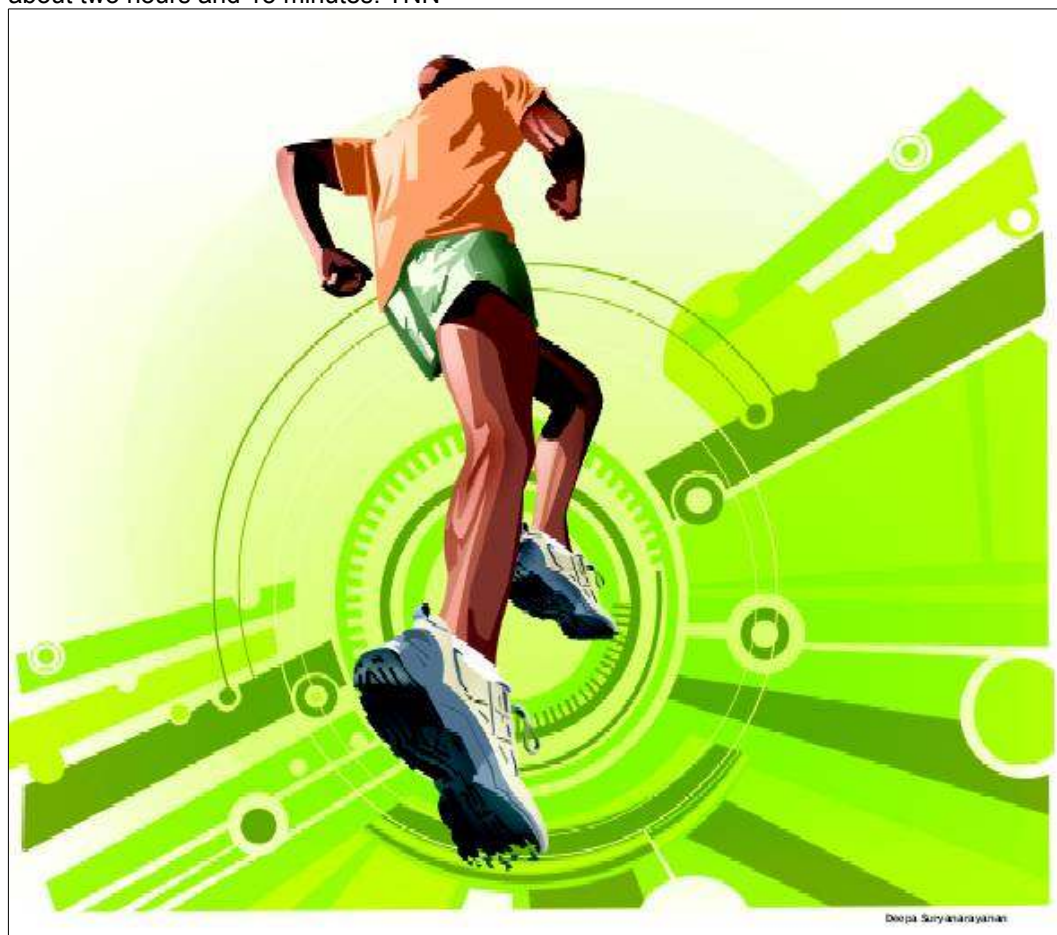
Now, if technology could help me find a coach, I reckoned it could help me run better. Some more reading on the internet later, I latched on to heart rate monitors (HRM). Hugely popular with athletes in the Western world, it is an idea that hasn't caught on in India yet. The device consists of a belt that you wear around your chest

and a wrist receiver that doubles up as a watch. To cut a long story short, it essentially monitors how hard your heart is pumping while you're working out. So, if your heart is pumping too hard, you know you need to cut down on how much you're pushing yourself. The flipside is also true—maybe you aren't pushing hard enough and your body is capable of doing more.

As a thumb rule, your maximum heart rate (MHR) is measured by a simple formula ($220 - \text{your age}$). In my case, that works out to 186. Thanks to the device which I picked up a few weeks ago, I now know I won't be able to sustain my run for too long if my HR is in the region of 155-165, and that I need to cut down. In much the same way, I know it when I'm running slow and can pick up some more pace. I must file a caveat here—there is no one-size-fits-all-formula when it comes to measuring heart rate. Consult your doctor for professional advice.

I use a very basic heart rate monitor built by an American company called Omron (www.omronhealthcare.com). There are others like Polar (www.polar.fi) that build some seriously high end HRMs for enthusiasts. Maybe, I'll reward myself with one in the future.

And finally, signing up with an online running group helps. I'm on www.coolrunning.com. You can share notes with other users on how your performance is shaping up, ask questions, or simply look for a kind word to keep you going when you need one. If my own obduracy doesn't get to me, by January I will run the half marathon in about two hours and 15 minutes. TNN



Deepa Sanyalnarayanan

