

Updated: September 24, 2015 16:17 IST

Two wheels and a dream at India's first wheelchair marathon



As they gear up for The Kotak Wheelchair Marathon, India's first, organised by The Spinal Foundation and supported by The Hindu, participants talk about what it means to push themselves beyond unimaginable boundaries.

It is early morning and golden-pink clouds scud across the Bay. The trees on the Marina's promenade bow low with the breeze and a group of men gazes into the distance in a dreamy setting that cinematographers chase whole lifetimes.

A few minutes ago, the inner road was humming with activity. Heads down and muscles rippling with every stroke of their arms, this group of manual wheelchair marathoners was racing towards a milestone, powering their vehicles against the perceptible drag of the wind, and riding hard on the tarred, uneven road. Fast cars, morning walkers, a family of gypsies and a lone crow — the marathoners sped past them all to complete their individual loops. But the final race to the finish-line tape will be on September 20, when Chennai hosts India's first wheelchair marathon.

SCI leads to permanent loss of sensation, ability to walk, use of hands, bladder and bowel control and procreation, depending on the severity of the injury. And yet, 10,000 fresh cases of SCI are added every year to the nearly 10 million living with it. Most of these are preventable if only

people wear seatbelts and helmets while driving, address tumours and high fever immediately and wear harnesses while working at heights. Also, a person who has met with an accident should be put on a neck collar or spine board immediately. And do not offer water or make him sit as this could potentially delay surgery.

Organised by The Spinal Foundation (TSF), an umbrella organisation and national self-help group for persons with spinal cord injury (SCI), the marathon is part of Spinal Cord Injury Awareness Day on September 25. There is also a quiz on September 26 for school children at IIT. But the marathon, with its focus on prevention of SCI, tops the list.

The group of wheelchair marathoners — software professionals and entrepreneurs — at Marina Beach, couldn't agree more. They have endured their life-changing accidents with uncommon courage and the support of their families and friends and each of their stories is an amazing parable of what the human body and the mind are capable of.

Justin Jesudas, director, partner programmes, TSF, and main organiser of the marathon, says, "This is an inclusive event to raise funds for those with SCI, especially in rural areas, who don't often benefit from peer support and lead sheltered lives or are unemployed. We are expecting around 100 wheelchair and 1,000 able-bodied participants."

Justin was 29 when his car crashed into a road median and he was paralysed neck below. Two stints of rehabilitation at CMC Vellore helped him on the excruciating road to living a life with some amount of mobility. Justin, who is able to use only his shoulders and his elbows, has gone on to conquer realms he had never ventured into before. He learnt to swim and has won gold at the CanAm Para Swimming and World Championships and is among the top 15 paralympic swimmers in the world. He plays basketball occasionally, and even drives a modified car. "When I realised I could never walk again, I focussed instead on making myself independent. It was a slow process, and from someone needing to be fed and clothed, I'm now dependent on no one to move around. I drive my wife and parents to Bangalore. I'm fitter now than when I was able-bodied," laughs Justin, a deputy general manager at Cognizant Technology Solutions, for whom this will be the first marathon.

A fall from a building while a student at IIM-Bangalore did not deter S. Vaidyanathan, who is paralysed waist below, from completing his MBA or becoming a business journalist. "It matters that you are rehabilitated at the right time and place. Your anger and disappointment should be channelled into trying to lead a life of near-normalcy," says Vaidyanathan, now a full-time TSF volunteer.

Ganesh Murugan, an entrepreneur, is a regular marathoner who effortlessly finishes the gruelling 42 km in his wheelchair. Naveen Iyer who works for Accenture, and businessman Natarajan,

have not let their injuries stop them. And when you can do a wheelie like Gajendra Negi from Rishikesh, you know that these are more than mere profiles in bravery.

Says Komal Kamra, director, development, TSF, “Since this is our first marathon, we chose to do it in one city and gradually extend it to the other metros. Our aim is to get the attention of people and the Government on prevention of road traffic accidents and other issues of wheelchair users.” A professor at SGTB Khalsa College, Delhi, Komal, who is wheelchair-bound, also peer counsels people with SCI and their families. “It’s an arduous task, making people believe in themselves. One way is to become financially independent. We help them find alternative jobs if they are unable to return to what they were doing earlier.”

TSF’s motto, Living Well with SCI, finds resonance in the life of Maj. HPS Ahluwalia (retd.) patron-in-chief. Maj. Ahluwalia, an Everest summiteer in May 1965, found himself confined to a wheelchair mere months later due to a bullet injury in the Indo-Pak War. Over the half-century since, he has been a leading advocate for the SCI community. Since there is no cure for SCI yet and the effects are lifelong, the marathon’s main objective is to raise awareness on prevention.

Final-year college student Harsha Jain, who is visually-impaired and wheel-chair confined, says she is participating because “it’s a privilege to be able to do something so normal”. And the Shenoy’s are running in the memory of their son who had multiple sclerosis.

On Sunday, be there to run along or cheer these marathoners as they race towards the finish line. But also be there to witness that rare thing — the triumph of the human spirit.

Run With Us at The Kotak Wheelchair Marathon will be held along Marina Beach on September 20 between 5.30 a.m. and 8 a.m.

The distances marked are 5 km, 3 km and 1 km.

It’s an inclusive event — the marathon is open to both able-bodied and wheelchair participants.

The registration fee is Rs. 650; register at www.thespinalfoundation.in

For details call 098404 95095 or 1800 425 1210. .