

Chandra Gopalan - Breaking Barriers

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She's a regular in the Ultra running circuit, a silhouette that can be recognized from a distance to those who are familiar with her. She's a lone woman in a pack of men who call themselves JLBR. She's the one who cracks the whip to keep the boys steadfast on back breaking strengthening sessions and she's also the one to cajole them on tough days. JLBR - Jobless Long Boring Runners, are but anything like their name suggests, none are jobless and none are boring. They take on roads, trails, hills, forests, heat, traffic and anything that is thrown at them during the training period. And like everything else in the universe, the group revolves around a woman, for she holds them in the promise of inspiration and true love for endurance.

Chandra Gopalan is flesh and blood for everything a modern woman can aspire to be. Businesswoman, super-athlete, boss, mum, coach and more than anything an endearing friend. Running's been a cement to hold these building blocks of her life. Chandra's been running a long time, a long time in a country where running is still a young sport and women's participation in prestigious events across the country still cut a sorry figure. She started running in 2004 and moved to ultra-distances in 2008 and has been on a streak ever since. With running comes the extra adage of being strong and fit enough to stay upright and finish strong and strong means strengthening. In a country that is still waking up to the idea of women folk sharing the gym floor with men and picking equally heavy weights, Chandra has been doing this for a while now. Men from Talwarkar's gym would know, circa early 2000s.

So what got her started on her running journey? She says "When the gym closed for renovation, I headed off to Ulsoor Lake to run and there I met with volunteers from the NGO - Parikrama including many foreign volunteers who motivated me to run a marathon. I just loved the outdoors and that's when the running bug bit me. Post that I ran a half marathon in Bangalore, then a half at Mumbai. I finished podium first in the Veteran category with a timing of 1:55." She still remembers a time when one of

the few Marathons in India did not allow women to participate in those early years stating that women could not physically endure such distances.

Not only did running and fitness change Chandra personally but it also shaped her professional choices. After nearly two decades in the airline industry, she made a big shift and launched Contours in partnership with Contours Express (an international fitness chain, HQ in the U.S.A) in 2006. Contours was launched with the intention of letting women workout in a women only environment and catered to bringing in a culture where women could put themselves and their health first and also create a community of warm, confident women.



Chandra personally counseled women and created circuit training workouts that took care of Cardio and Strength in a 29 minutes session. A routine for women looking to come in for a quick effective workout. Over the years, she has tweaked the offering of Contours to cater to Indian womens' needs. While many women wanted quick results and overnight weight-loss, Chandra and her team had to step in to counsel and educate women to understand that years of inactive life or weight gain needs time to be worked on. Over the years, Contours has expanded into India's biggest chain of Women's only gyms and has presence in many cities with multiple centers. She also conducts an annual Women's day run to raise funds for Shristi Special Academy. This annual event is held to raise awareness and empower children in need. 800 special children have been provided for through 7 editions.

So what got her started on the Ultra journey? "The Ultra format is not about speed and I am under no pressure to run fast. I love that I can stay on my feet for long hours and push my mind and body." says Chandra who has been on an Ultra streak since 2008. "For me it's been more about the training runs than the actual race day. I love training with JLBR and the boys. They are an integral part of my life and my running journey." So who are the JLBRs? They are a group of Ultra runners, a sub-sect of Runners High which is one of the largest group of runners in Bangalore led by SanthoshPadmanabhan. The group comprises folks doing anything from 75 KM to running 36 hours Ultra formats.



For Chandra, the Ultra running was preceded by four full marathons at Mumbai, Bangalore Midnight Marathon, Auroville and Kaveri Trail Marathon. She ran her first Ultra distance at Bangalore Ultra with a 50 K. To date she's run 50 K thrice, 75 K once, 100 K once, 12 hour once, 24 hour run thrice and 36 hour once. The 36 hr challenge was on a 400 meter loop at Kanteerava stadium, yes, 36hrs on a 400 meter loop. A machine does that and so does Chandra and she's far from done.

So what is a 24 hour run like? "I have a predictable and consistent pattern. After so many runs I have come to know what to expect. The first 8 hours are phenomenal and I am on a high. My toughest hours start at night and I have a tough time from 11-2.30 when my body is tired and I am unable to keep any food in. But as we near the finish segment, I have renewed energy and go for the finish!" One of her moments to cherish was being swept up into the air by her son Sid at the finish line of her 24 hour Ultra! She hopes to complete her second 36 hour stadium run (imagine running 400 meter loops around the stadium again) this year and maybe do a 100 miler (160 Kms).



Some who have seen and supported Chandra through her runs can vouch that she is a woman of real grit. Even in her toughest times she looks at life positively and running has pulled her through some tough times and life has thrown its fair share at her personally and professionally. "I do not fight against things I know I cannot change. You accept the inevitable and focus on doing your best at changing what you can and let life happen." Chandra who lost her husband recently to cancer, went through tough years, but those who have seen her during this time have always seen the strong, smiling and ever approachable woman they have always known.



For women who want to start a transformative journey in active living, Chandra says “Start with realistic goals as changes don’t happen overnight. Get to the gym, show up, it may be slow in the beginning but consistency will yield results. Over a period, the family will get used to it and it becomes a part of your lifestyle. Years of gaining weight and nutritional negligence will take time to fix. Many people aren’t aware of what their bodies are capable of if they stay consistent and work at it.”

It pains her that the society puts boundaries on women. “You shouldn’t push yourself. You are a mother and you need to be careful. There is so much guilt placed on women if they give themselves time to care for their health or their bodies that many women give up.” Chandra, who is nearing 60, still has to deal with comments from extended family members on her passion for Ultra distances and training regimen. She takes them in her stride and along the way busts myths around women, age and exercise. “Women need to continue to stay active and exercise as they age to keep themselves from osteoporosis and muscle atrophy.”

To women on pursuing their passions, she says: “Just go for it. Don’t let anyone stop you from anything that you want to do. Don’t let other people judge you. End of the day what you want is what matters.”

And Chandra, we know you wouldn’t let anything stop you from achieving your dreams!