



RUNNING *with* DREAMS

DREAM RUNNERS
Champions of Chennai – Sports

Even before the Sun's rays can find gaps to shine through to usher in the dawn, one hears the thup-thup of feet through the serene Besant Avenue Road in Chennai. It's passion's sound! Passion they say is energy. One needs to feel the power that comes from focusing on doing what excites you. It enables your purpose and ignites your way.

A group of people working-out in a gym feeling claustrophobic there felt this passion - for running! And decided to take it outdoors, quoting that it was a crime to not make the most of living by the seaside. And there was born Dream Runners in 2008, a running group that aims to create a healthy and fit city through running. Today the group boasts of 12 area wise chapters, with a database of 500 runners in Chennai city bringing awareness about a wellness culture that encourages a physically active life among all sections of society and they are also the organizers of the prodigious flagship event DRHM – Dream Runners' Half-Marathon that sees nearly 5000 participants running. Dream Runners today stands as an icon of fitness, by enabling running enthusiasts to find joy in running long distance.

Realising that more and more people were interested in running, the group decided to create a formal structure for training, with customised schedules to meet the needs of various runners for they understand that everybody comes with their own physical constitution and thus would need different approaches. Also to cater to people from different areas, the group, over the years has enabled self-reliant chapters in different localities – like Annanagar, Boat Club, OMR, Marina Beach, Medavakkam, MRC Nagar, Velachery, Avadi and Airport side. Each chapter operates independently with some guidance and inputs from the core group in the Besant nagar chapter.

There is also the DRET – Dream Runners' Executive Team, which is a group of heads of each of the chapters, with whom the core group connects at regular intervals to cohesively decide on group runs.

A free-structured training programme, introduced by Dream Runners for the first time ever in any marathon history, is in place for any novice who wants to start running irrespective of age. The group has 11 coaches for 11 groups who will take a wannabe-runner through the paces of strengthening the core and legs three months prior to a major run. A runner is built thereon slowly from scratch. He is guided at every step until he is able enough to do a full-fledged half run. It is tremendously liberating for a runner to realize he has it in him to go the distance! The high, the self-discovery, the discipline and the incredible health benefits he experiences make him usually want to keep at it. He sets a higher goal and eventually becomes self-motivated enough to push his limits.

The question that is usually uppermost on everyone's mind would be who can run? The group believes anybody can. Testimonies to this are 60 - 73 year old runners, cancer-survivors and obese people who have taken that one step and felt the therapeutic change. The group advocates a systematic process through which one needs to persevere for changes cannot come overnight. The confidence

and motivation that one feels after managing what one thought was an impossible distance needs to be experienced to be understood, opines the group. The key they believe is to give an individual a group to run with where he will find the encouragement in the form of like-minded friends to keep at it, which is where the chapters play a key role.

DRHM that is open to public and sees about 5000 runners has been rated as the No. 1 marathon event in India consecutively for the last 3 years. The accent is on quality rather than quantity, making a splash or taking on more than they can handle. They prefer to tread on the side of caution for their objective is to get runners ready for the 10km or the 21km marathon.





The reason for the success and growth of DRHM they concur, is the democracy within the group where the roles are well-defined and each handles one aspect like sponsorships or CSR activities or training.

In addition to creating awareness about health and fitness, CSR and running for well-researched causes are central to DRHM. They have also reached out to Corporation schools to motivate them to participate. Social causes are one of the main reasons for the events. They inspire participation and help generate funds, which are donated to NGOs. The Dream Runners have so far enabled about a crore in donations and 17 NGOs have benefitted in the last

10 years. Sneha Foundation, the Freedom Trust for Rehabilitation, Education and Empowerment of the disabled, PCVC (Foundation for crime prevention and victim care), Organ transplantation, Olcott School, Besant nagar, Avvai Home

etc are some of the carefully chosen, researched beneficiaries. In the last 6 years DRHM has been closely associated with the Freedom Trust and they have created a separate initiative for the 'Walk India Movement' with the tagline 'We run, so they can walk'. Several assessment and distribution of artificial limbs camps have been attended by the members of Dream Runners not just in Tamilnadu but also in Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Assam. Beyond the CSR, the members have reached out to police officials to donate masks, to frontline workers during the pandemic, to the needy and have done the needful in their own small way.

The main challenge for them has been in retaining people and the runners. Injuries are also rampant. When there are injuries, the group tries an alternate mode

of exercising like walking, cycling etc. And here was born the Dream Walkers, where instead of running members are encouraged to walk to keep the fitness momentum going. Getting sponsors was another challenge. As a Trust too sustaining is a daunting task as they have to ensure all the norms are being complied with and the organization is run professionally as they do not possess full time staff. Everything is managed by the members who juggle full-time jobs, on a purely voluntary basis.

Amongst the campaigns that they are known for, a major shot in the arm for the Dream Runners has been the 'She Should Run' initiative; which encouraged droves of women runners, understanding their journeys thereby cultivating the discipline in and the wholesomeness of families running. 'Run clean' campaign is yet another initiative that focuses on avoiding littering. A plan is put in place to segregate waste and waste minimizing is the aim. Plogging – a term invented by Erik Ahlstrom referring to the act of picking up trash and litter while jogging is yet another successful accomplishment that only Dream Runners have managed thereby making a huge difference to the environment and setting a high bar for others to follow. Even the lockdown did not deter them for they came up with a virtual run to ensure participation from all over the world.

Chennai, they believe is not a marathon-friendly place although they are willing to be bigger than they are and are willing to host more participants provided the city and its planners evolve to support. But their focus, they assure, will continue to be to create more chapters and runners, create fitness habits, and ensure 'me time' and the wellness and healthy lifestyle of the city. For championing a healthy landscape, for understanding that health trumps everything, the Dream Runners are true champions of Chennai!

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