

# RUN LIKE FIRE ONCE MORE

Chasing perfection at the world's longest footrace

By Sam Shaw

The runners slog past a bivouac of plastic card tables and folding chairs, past electric-green Port-O Lets ripe with disinfectant, past indifferently groomed hedges and the redbrick facade of Thomas A. Edison Vocational and Technical High School. At the corner of 168th Street, they cut north to the Grand Central Parkway, the course rising gently as trucks and cars rocket by. The concrete apron is a blinding white line. They pass illegally parked cars, wipers festooned with tickets. Trash has blown into the grass of Joseph Austin park, named for Mario Cuomo's childhood baseball coach. Here are silent handball and basketball courts, and a playground where sprinklers throw a flume across a mid-way empty of children. Alone or in twos or threes, the runners pass the hydrants and trash cans of 164th Place, moving southward to Abigail Adams Avenue and thence east a half-block under shade trees to the row of card



tables, where women jot notes on clipboards, like a delegation of Green Party poll watchers. At a comfortable pace, you can walk the loop in about ten minutes. The course of the world's longest footrace measures .5488 miles.

I first walked it myself on a balmy day last June, then found a seat at Base Camp among a half-dozen volunteers, bright-eyed European women and men with the lost-boy quality of scoutmasters. A giant digital clock was perched atop a pair of milk crates. Every few minutes one of the racers passed by, and we all applauded.

At 3:00 P.M., amid a crackling of police bullhorns, 2,000 mostly black and Hispanic teenagers emptied out of Edison High. They pumped their

legs, lampooning the runners' form, sometimes diverting the race into traffic. "The first couple years, the kids threw things at us," a volunteer told me.

Such were the hazards last summer in Jamaica, Queens, at the tenth running of the Self-Transcendence 3,100. The fifteen participants—all but two

of them disciples of the Bengali Guru Sri Chinmoy, who has resided in the neighborhood for forty years—hailed from ten countries on three continents. They ran in all weather, seven days a week, from 6:00 A.M. to midnight, or until their bodies compelled them to rest. If they logged fewer than fifty miles on a given day, they risked disqualification. By their own reckoning, the runners climbed eight meters per lap, mounting and descending a spectral Everest every week and a half. They toiled in this fashion for six to eight weeks, however long it took them to complete 5,649 circuits—3,100 miles—around a single city block.

Before any concerns aesthetic or spiritual, the loop serves the practi-

*Sam Shaw is a writer living in Brooklyn. This is his first article for Harper's Magazine.*



cal function of enabling the Base Camp crew to attend to the physical requirements of runners traveling at all speeds. (By the sixth week of the race, nine hundred miles would separate course record holder Madhupran Wolfgang Schwert, of Solingen, Germany, from Suprabha Beckjord, in last place.<sup>1</sup>) But in another, more ethereal sense, the Self-Transcendence Race could not exist on any other course. Here was a kind of living koan, a race of invisible miles across a phantom plain wider than the continental United States. For fifty days, breathing miasmal exhaust from the Grand Central Parkway, the runner traversed a wilderness of knapsack-toting teenagers, beat cops, and ladies piloting strollers. Temperatures spiked. Power grids crashed. Cars also crashed—into the chain-link fence around Joe Austin park or into other cars. There was occasional street crime. One summer a student was knifed in the head. The runner endured. He crossed the finish line changed. It was said to be the most difficult racecourse in the world. Point-to-point racing is gentler on the spirit, and concrete is ten times more punishing than asphalt. Such hurdles were more than necessary evils; they were central to the nature of the race. As one of the disciples told me, grinning and drawing air quotes with his fingers, “It’s ‘impossible.’”

I fell into step beside Abichal Watkins, a forty-five-year-old Welshman with a keen, appraising squint. After only five days, he looked like a man who had wandered out of the desert with a story to tell. “There are so few things for the mind to dwell on here,” Abichal said. “It loses its strength.” Relative to most of the racers, Abichal—born Kelvin and rechristened in 1999 by Sri Chinmoy—came to distance running late in life. That tale begins in the mid-1990s, when Chinmoy an-

nounced the completion of his millionth “Soul Bird” painting (artworks expressing the “heart’s oneness”), and his disciples resolved to match the feat by running, collectively, a million miles. Abichal pledged an even thousand. Within a year, Chinmoy had painted another million Soul Birds, and the running project was scuttled, but Abichal kept it up. In Wales he edits a magazine and a website devoted to multiday ultramarathons. He had finished the Self-Transcendence Race twice before; a third attempt failed when his visa expired 2,700 miles in.

We passed Edison High, progressing counterclockwise up 168th Street toward the Grand Central Parkway. (The runners switch direction every day, not for the sake of novelty but to ensure that the toll of rounding corners is borne equally by both legs.) Abichal does not consider himself an athlete. “The race is a metaphor for life.” He gestured, lassoing the whole of Jamaica around us. “People in the neighborhood, we’ll see them year after year. They stop by, say hi. They ask, ‘How do you do that?’” He laughed. This was the first interview I conducted while power-walking. It was awkward. My pen kept slipping in my hand.

Abichal wore an iPod clipped to his waist, jarring my notion of the Chinmoy disciples as latter-day ascetics. I wondered what he had been listening to. “Fix You,” he said, “by Coldplay.” For more than a hundred miles, Abichal had been listening to the track on a continuous loop. (“Lights will guide you home,” the chorus intones, “and ignite your bones.”) He gazed philosophically at his iPod. “There’s something special about this song.”

As we neared 164th Place, a white town car pulled gently to the curb. With the speed and nonchalance of a dope dealer, a man in the passenger seat reached through the window and deposited something into Abichal’s hands. Sri Chinmoy. The sight of him tripped me up. Here was the Guru himself, gold-complected, resplendently bald. Dressed as if for a day at the public pool, in shorts and a cotton shirt, he did not look like a

man who had inspired seven thousand followers in sixty countries to forswear alcohol, tobacco, meat, and sex. I wanted to stop, but the race paused for no man, not even an avatar of divine consciousness.

A few paces ahead, Abichal studied the objects he’d received: two strawberries, cupped in his palms like bulbous, red communion wafers. “I don’t know why he gave me two,” he said. He turned to me, suddenly serious. “I think one of them is for you.” Our fables, stretching back to the myth of Persephone and Genesis 3:6, teach circumspection in receiving gifts of fruit. Abichal nodded, and I ate the Guru’s strawberry. Within a few weeks, the runners would be hobbled by distance, gorging ice cream and butter to stem the loss of body weight. We passed the giant digital clock, and the women applauded.

Two thousand eight hundred and thirty miles to go.

**T**he specter of death has hung over long-distance running since Robert Browning published his *Dramatic Idylls* in 1879. In a flight of lyric fancy widely mistaken for truth, the poem “Pheidippides” describes an ill-starred footman sprinting from Marathon to Athens with news of a surprise Greek victory in an early battle of the Persian Wars.

So, when Persia was dust, all cried,  
 “To Akropolis!  
 Run Pheidippides, one race more! the  
 meed is thy due!  
 ‘Athens is saved, thank Pan,’ go  
 shout!” He flung down his shield  
 Ran like fire once more: and the space  
 ’twixt the Fennel-field  
 And Athens was stubble again, a field  
 which a fire runs through,  
 Till in he broke: “Rejoice, we  
 conquer!” Like wine through clay,  
 Joy in his blood bursting his heart, he  
 died—the bliss!

Never mind that the story is plainly apocryphal, a pastiche of Herodotus, Plutarch, and Lucian. When Pierre de Coubertin organized the first modern Olympic Games, his friend the philologist Michael Breal urged him to include a distance race in tribute to the doomed runner. Today, in spite of the fact that hundreds of thousands of Americans run

<sup>1</sup> The fifty-year-old proprietor of the Washington, D.C., gift shop *Transcendence-Perfection-Bliss of the Beyond*, Beckjord is the only female competitor in the race’s history and the only ten-time participant, having returned to Jamaica every June since the inaugural running. She has logged enough miles around Edison High to circle the equator.



marathons,<sup>2</sup> the long-distance athlete in popular culture is typically a Jobian figure, tortured and solitary. Iconic Nike ads of the '90s cast him in grainy black and white, doubled over and unleashing a stream of vomit onto his shoes. The hero of William Goldman's *Marathon Man* gets his teeth drilled by a Nazi. Always, the runner is haunted. His race is a form of flight—from himself, from the mediocrity of society, from a lugubrious backstory.

Browning reimagined Pheidippides at the height of the so-called Golden Age of Pedestrianism. In 1878, the Crimean War veteran, baronet, and amateur sports promoter Sir John Dugdale Astley launched a series of six-day exhibition footraces, held along ellipse tracks before throngs of delirious spectators. The winner crawled away with a cash purse and a small fortune in gate fees, as well as a silver-and-gold belt valued at £100 and bearing the legend LONG DISTANCE CHAMPION OF THE WORLD.

In June 1879, Edward Payson Weston strode 550 miles in six days along a wooden track in London's Agricultural Hall, beating 10-to-1 odds to become the first American-born Astley Belt champion and an international sensation. "There were Weston shoes, Weston hats, and Weston coats," rhapsodized *Harper's Weekly*. "Musicians composed Weston marches, and young ladies danced to Weston Waltzes." His "clean-cut and shrewd" face gazed nobly from photographs "in thousands of private dwellings as well as in most public places." The dandyish Rhode Island native was a star, and he behaved like one, preening and sulking, issuing crackpot state-

ments to the press, and hobnobbing with deep-pocketed strangers.

That August, Weston sailed from Liverpool to New York City on the steamship *Nevada*, but his triumph was partial and short-lived. The steamer *Harlem*, engaged to intercept the great pedestrian in New York Harbor with six kegs of beer, two cases of wine, and a basket of sandwiches, failed to arrive on schedule, and his admirers greeted him instead in a tugboat. Dressed in a priestly black suit, Weston griped to reporters about a prize watch he had been promised by the mayor of Newark that had never materialized. "If I owned a house in perdition and another in Newark," he said, "I'd rent the Newark house."

At a time when a pound of mutton cost fourteen cents, some 75,000 spectators paid a dollar apiece for admission to the next Astley Belt match, at Madison Square Garden. Loiterers choked 26th Street. They scaled drainpipes and shinnied up ropes to the low windows of the theater, where sentries lay in wait with sharpened sticks. The Englishman Charles Rowell covered 127 miles within the first day and night of the race. His early lead left scant doubt as to the eventual outcome, but the circus inside the Garden roiled on with a Boschian grandeur. Bands played "Yankee Doodle," "Tommy Dodd," and "Marching Through Georgia." Rowell sucked on a sponge while his countryman George Hazael cut a simian figure with his fumbling headlong stride. "The question is often asked, 'What is that thing?' when Hazael goes around," a reporter wrote with jingoistic cruelty, "but the questioner is always awed into silence when told that that is one of the best runners in England." Ever the showman, Weston burlesqued the gaits of his rivals, stopping now and then to spritz himself with eau de toilette from an atomizer he toted around the loop. The other contestants shuffled more or less suicidally toward the grail of 450 miles, short of which they would not see a nickel. It was a scene befitting the venue, raised by P. T. Barnum as a hippodrome for mock-Roman chariot exhibitions. Rowell took ill in the last days of the race, but his advantage was overwhelming. Amid a flurry of rumors that he had been mickeyed with a clus-

ter of poisoned grapes, he completed his 530th mile and repaired to his tent with Weston's prize belt and a share of the gate receipts totaling \$25,000—roughly the equivalent of \$500,000 today.

**T**he winner of the Self-Transcendence Race would return to his home country with a plastic trophy and a scrapbook. Each contestant forked over an entry fee of \$1,250—an investment none would recoup. Self-transcendence, it seemed, was not a lucrative career. In late June, Kuranga Peele of Neusiedl, Austria, flew home. In 2004, Peele had finished second, with the seventh-best time in race history. This year he had logged just over 660 miles. "Kuranga didn't feel up to it," Abichal explained. "You have to be totally committed, or the mind can get in the way."

As the fourteen remaining contestants sauntered around the block, it was impossible to tell at any given moment who was winning and who was losing. Madhupran Wolfgang Schwerk, with a lead of more than a hundred miles two weeks into the race, was heavily favored. Nobody at the racecourse expressed much surprise—Madhupran held the course record. I shadowed him past the playground with a mixture of admiration and unease. His gait called to mind pistons and crankshafts, the famous efficiency of German engineering. Just looking at him made me thirsty for a Coke. Short of a bunch of poisoned grapes, it was hard to imagine anybody closing the gap. This might have had something to do with Madhupran's support team. He was the only runner to have imported a full-time handler, Helmut Schieke, himself a former trans-America record holder, who hailed Schwerk whenever he finished a lap, often with a plastic cup of diet cola or tea or a slice of honeydew melon. He was also alone in having landed a corporate patron. LANXESS, a German producer of plastics and rubbers, had fronted his airfare, along with his registration fee. In exchange, he arrived each morning dressed in a crisp LANXESS singlet, matching shorts, and sneakers.

Cars passed Base Camp at the requisite school-zone crawl, and the drone of a lawn mower filled me with a strong Pavlovian urge to lie down in a ham-

<sup>2</sup> The ultramarathon (any race exceeding 26.22 miles), which attracts a smaller and more fanatical community of athletes, gained brief notoriety in January 2004, when a member of the Colorado running cult *Divine Madness* banked 207 miles in the forty-eight-hour race *Across the Years* and then dropped dead. Further afield, the "Marathon Monks" of Japan's Mount Hiei have practiced spiritual running in a ritual that dates to the eighth century. At the culmination of seven years of training, the aspirant logs two back-to-back marathons per night for three months, carrying a length of rope and a knife so that he can hang or disembowel himself if he fails to complete a run.



mock. On the refreshment table an argosy of chips, raisins, granola bars, olives, cookies, ice cream, and butter lay open to would-be saboteurs, but who would tamper with a race whose profits are tallied in the coinage of the soul?

On the corner of 168th Street, a man in a baseball cap was squinting through a handheld video camera at the pageant of runners drifting southward. "The footage isn't very good," he confessed, wagging his head. His name was Daniel, and he had flown to New York to report on the race for RTL, a German television station. A second German news team was supposed to arrive tomorrow, and Daniel planned to beat them to the story. Suprabha ambled past, talking on a cell phone. "The problem is, they don't really run," Daniel said. "They jog, they stop, they walk. I need *running*. I need sweat streaming down faces."

If the scene on Abigail Adams Avenue disappointed Daniel, the trouble was partly semantic. The Self-Transcendence Race was not, strictly speaking, a sporting event. It was spiritual detox. For two months the athletes paid no bills, ran no errands, conducted no business. They lived in a state of Thoreauvian simplicity. "The mind says it's stupid to go around and around," I was told by a volunteer named Aklanta, one of a squadron of chiropractors at the racecourse. "But it's not stupid on a higher plane." The race revealed the "true nature" above one's "base nature," he said. "You find out what your true nature wants. What does it *want*? Not what advertisements on television tell you you want. That's manipulation. I don't want to be manipulated. You need joy in your life. Otherwise, it's just stimulation—up and down, nothing constant."

A middle-aged man approached Base Camp. With his white mustache and straw boater, he recalled Edward Payson Weston walking through Confederate Maryland in 1861, disguised, in Weston's own words, by "Messrs Brooks, Brothers, clothing dealers" as a "Susquehanna Raftsman on a bender." He stopped on the sidewalk, watching the runners shuffle past with the dazed look of a man who had just been sprung from jail. And so he had—it was summer vacation. His furlough would stretch until the last week of August,

when he would return to his post as a laboratory specialist at Edison High. "Essentially, a test-tube washer. I help to purchase—or to prevent the purchase of—equipment. Mercury used to be a thing you played with," he said with nostalgia. "Now it's a deadly poison."

A credential sticking out of his shirt pocket identified the speaker as one M. Cogan. He wore his nametag religiously, a precaution dating to the years he worked at Bellevue Hospital. "Someone had to die for that," he explained. Europeans in high-performance sportswear parted around us as he related a long, grim story about a psychiatric patient in a stolen lab coat butchering a female doctor. "I'm not sure if he raped her before he dissected her or after or a little of both." On another occasion, he told me, a paraplegic escaped from the prison ward and disappeared across the border into Mexico. The thought of this wheelchair-bound fugitive thriving under Latin American skies seemed to cheer him up. "They're good neighbors," he said of the Self-Transcendence crew. "That's all I know. Chinmoy seems to attract a nice crowd. But I haven't got to the point where I want to join." He had first encountered the group on an afternoon in the 1970s when a bald-headed stranger reproached him for lighting a cigarette in a local restaurant. The stranger was Sri Chinmoy. "I guess it's a clean-living cult sort of thing. Like the Mormon Church." Not long thereafter, noticing Chinmoy's name in a letter submitted to the *New York Times* by the composer Leonard Bernstein, Cogan realized the Guru was a famous and important man.

We strolled together past the line of Port-O Lets to the refreshment table, where Cogan stopped and told a spindly German volunteer that he intended to run a race of his own, albeit one of humbler length. He seemed an unlikely candidate for cardiovascular exercise, but in this climate of burgeoning goodwill, with songbirds flicking through the trees and rival German news teams trolling Joe Austin park, all things seemed possible. Cogan beamed at the disciples, "You've inspired me."

What, exactly, had Leonard Bernstein written to the *Times*? I never

found the letter Mike Cogan remembered, but an item in an April 1979 *Notes on People* column described a recently formed "mutual admiration society" comprising the Guru and the flamboyant composer of *West Side Story*:

Sri Chinmoy, whose followers say he has written 3,000 songs, dropped by Mr. Bernstein's Manhattan apartment a few weeks ago, and brought with him a choral group that sang a new Chinmoy number called, "Leonard Bernstein." It went, in part:

Leonard Bernstein, Leonard!  
Eternity's singing bird! Beauty truth,  
Truth beauty,  
Nectar oneness your divinity.

Bernstein had responded in kind, presenting the Guru with an original work for sitar, flute, tabla, bass, and drone. Until recently, all I had known of the Guru I owed to an LP called *Love, Devotion, Surrender*, a 1973 jazz-rock fiasco by Carlos Santana and John McLaughlin, both former Chinmoy disciples.<sup>3</sup>

Born August 27, 1931,<sup>4</sup> in East Bengal, India, and orphaned at twelve, the Guru spent his adolescence and early adulthood studying meditation at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, where he earned the title Fastest Runner twelve years in a row. In 1964 he emigrated to New York and took a job as an assistant in the passport-and-visa section of the Indian Consulate. These were lean years for the Guru. According to his memoirs, he lunched on potato chips or candy bars, often in a telephone booth outside his office, but already he was laying the foundation for his spiritual mission, playing free concerts and lecturing on Hinduism. In the ensuing decades, the Guru's self-transcen-

<sup>3</sup> The music critic Robert Christgau describes its artwork thus: "On the back cover is a photograph of three men. Two of them are dressed in white and have their hands folded—one grinning like Alfred E. Neuman, the other looking like he's about to have a Supreme Court case named after him: solemn, his wrists ready for the cuffs. In between, a man in an orange ski jacket and red pants with one white sock seems to have caught his tongue on his lower lip. He looks like the yoga coach at a fashionable lunatic asylum. Guess which one is Sri Chinmoy."

<sup>4</sup> The 3,100-mile distance of the Self-Transcendence Race celebrates Chinmoy's birth year; an earlier incarnation, held in 1996, measured 2,700 miles, in honor of his birthday.



dence empire fanned across six continents, spurred by a distinctly American flair for public relations.

He has performed original tribute songs for a motley assortment of public figures, including Sting, Jane Goodall, Carl Lewis, Kofi Annan, and Quincy Jones, whose cryptic endorsement "Sri Chinmoy is such a brave musician!" appears on posters promoting the Guru's concerts. Besides Grammy winners and athletes, his disciples include Ashrita Furman, the manager of a Queens health-food store, who has set 148 Guinness World Records—a meta-record itself—most recently for backward bowling, egg-and-spoon racing, and lemon eating. Photographs posted on Chinmoy's official websites and displayed in the businesses operated by his disciples show the Guru, whose philanthropic network The Oneness-Heart-Tears and Smiles delivers medical supplies around the globe, glad-handing a variety roster of world leaders—Princess Diana, Popes Paul VI and John Paul II, Mikhail Gorbachev, Mother Teresa. Nelson Mandela once called him an "outstanding soldier of peace."

In 1996, a district superintendent of the National Park Service approved a plan to install a brass plaque in the lobby of the Statue of Liberty that would officially designate the foremost icon of American democracy a Sri Chinmoy Peace Blossom site. Three hundred or so spectators attended the unveiling on the Guru's sixty-fifth birthday. Within a month, the Park Service reversed its decision, and the plaque was removed, but similar plaques identify more than 900 surviving Peace Blossoms around the world, including cultural centers (the Sydney Opera House), natural formations (the Matterhorn, the Great Barrier Reef), airports (Afonso Pena in Curitiba, Brazil), and political frontiers (the entirety of the Russia-Norway border). In 1994 the late king of Nepal officially christened an unclimbed four-mile-high Himalayan peak "Sri Chinmoy Peace Mountain."

I took to lunching a few blocks from the racecourse at Annam Brahma restaurant, where footage of Sri Chinmoy's sundry exploits airs continuously on a wall-mounted television. In

1985 he took up weightlifting; clips of the Guru hoisting all manner of eccentric burdens flashed across the screen while I sipped my *lassis*. With the aid of a special scaffold, he calf-raised people,<sup>5</sup> cars, the 1,495 volumes of his collected poetry and prose.<sup>6</sup> It brought to mind the omnipotence paradox: Could God produce an oeuvre He couldn't lift? The footage resembled one of those supplemental tapes certain enterprising high school juniors append to their college applications. The Guru was a grind and a jock. He was the most prolific painter who ever lived. He had read poetry with Joyce Carol Oates and jammed with Carlos Santana. He claimed to have lifted 7,064 pounds and 7,040 pounds with his right and left arms, respectively. Not since Da Vinci had a single man been so well-rounded.

Other videos were available for download on the Guru's websites. In

<sup>5</sup> Since 1988, when he launched his "Lifting Up the World with a Oneness-Heart" campaign, Chinmoy has ceremonially hoisted more than 7,000 friends and celebrities, including Jesse Jackson; Cambodian Prime Minister Samdech Hun San; Ravi Shankar; Moorhead Kennedy, held hostage 444 days in Iran; Mickey Thomas, lead vocalist of Jefferson Starship; and the actresses Mercedes Ruehl and Alyssa Milano.

<sup>6</sup> A selection of titles from the Chinmoy library attests to the breadth of the Guru's interests: The Earth-Illumination-Trumpets of Divinity's Home, Part 1; I Play Tennis Every Day; The Ambition-Deer; Einstein: Scientist-Sage, Brother of Atom-Universe; Impurity: The Mad Elephant Mental Asylum; A Soulful Tribute to the Secretary-General: The Pilot Supreme of the United Nations; God Wants to Read This Book; Great Indian Meals: Divinely Delicious and Supremely Nourishing; Gorbachev: The Master-Key of the Universal Heart; Muhammad Ali and Sri Chinmoy Meditate; Come, My Non-English Friends! Let Us Together Climb Up the English Himalayas; The Mushroom and the Umbrella; My Heart's Salutation to Australia; A Mystic Journey in the Weightlifting World, Part One; Airport Elevation: Questions Answered by Master Sri Chinmoy at the San Juan International Airport, October 29, 1976; I Love Shopping, Part 1; My Ivy League Leaves: Lectures on the Spiritual Life; Niagara Falls Versus Children's Rise; Religion-Jugglery and God-Discovery; The Sailor and the Parrot; War: Man's Abysmal Abyss-Plunge, Part 1; Sleep: Death's Little Sister; Canada Aspires, Canada Receives, Canada Achieves; Yes, I Can! I Certainly Can!!

one of them, the seventy-four-year-old Chinmoy purports to curl a 256-pound dumbbell. The weight rests on a platform above the Guru's left leg. He knits his face and hums. At the appointed moment, an assistant lowers the platform and the weight sits motionless on Chinmoy's leg. After ten seconds, the assistant replaces the platform, and the Guru smiles beatifically. The footage presented a kind of Rorschach test. Where some found proof of the existence of God, others saw an old man supporting a dumbbell on his knee. I showed the video to friends. "I don't get it," they said. "Did he lift the weight or not?" I kept silent. Here was the pertinent question. Once you answered, there was no turning back. For the moment, I preferred to live in a world of divine strongmen.

**I**n six decades of professional footwork, Edward Payson Weston endured all manner of setbacks and injuries. He sprained ankles and toes. Fevers and stomach cramps dogged him, as well as creditors, who took advantage of his highly publicized walks to have him arrested for unpaid debts. Once he was shot in the leg. Always Weston rallied. On the seventh day of the walk that made his name, a pilgrimage from Boston to Washington, D.C., for Abraham Lincoln's 1861 inauguration, he broke for a predawn restorative of sandwiches. This proved a tactical mistake, saddling the pedestrian with chest pains, which he blamed on mustard. His companions noted:

He stopped every quarter of a mile and sat down to sleep; was exceedingly irritable, which caused the whole party to have the blues, of the "darkest kind." Mr. Weston concludes to go back half a mile, to a public house and sleep. . . . He returns a few steps, when, suddenly throwing off his blanket, he exclaims: "No, I wont go back!" and, wheeling around, strikes into a four-mile gait.

Such theatrics, anticipating James Brown's stage show by a full century, typified Weston's spirit on the road. Some of the same mettle could be found in Jamaica, where ingrown nails on both of Pranab Vladovic's big toes had become a topic of worried conversation. Slight and boyish, with close-cropped hair, Pranab sat on a



massage table considering the problem. His feet looked like they had been dredged out of the East River—chalky white with a thick brownish discharge at the nail beds. “These are the cards you get,” he announced with equanimity. A few disciples stood around the massage table while a podiatrist, sober and brusque in a tan nylon jacket and gray nylon pants, frowned at the suppurating digits. The diagnosis was bleak. If he left the nails intact, he explained, the infection might compromise the bone, and the toes would have to be removed. Pranab hugged his knees.

“Can he keep walking?” someone asked.

The question seemed to rattle the doctor. “That’s his choice. I wouldn’t do it. How much farther till he’s done?”

“Two thousand miles.”

The distance unfurled like a carpet spanning from Queens to Juarez, Mexico. I winced a little at the sound of the figure. “You got no shot,” the doctor said.

The race, however, had a physic all its own. “You get scared beforehand,” Abichal had told me. “Your body gets scared. It’s like stage fright. Like moving into a different realm.” For two months, the high school and ball courts and the abutting stretch of parkway became a shrine. Did I know about ley lines? Abichal asked. The theory, as articulated in the 1920s by one Alfred Watkins (no relation), posits a system of arcane pathways linking megaliths, tors, and other craggy points across Britain, and possibly the world. Largely ignored by science, ley lines have enjoyed a colorful life in the hinterlands of paranormalism, championed to various ends by psychics, pagans, dowsers, UFOlogists, dime-store novelists, and a few Nazi cranks who attributed a network of *heilige Linien* or “holy lines” crisscrossing Europe to the ancient Teutons.

“There are rivers, superhighways of energy,” Abichal told me, “and there are junctions where they meet.” The junctions exert a spiritual tug. Stonehenge, for instance, or Sedona. “Sedona is a big energy vortex.” So, too, the racecourse. “I get a good vibe here,” he said, indicating a triangle of lawn behind the wrought-iron fencing of the high school. “It’s open. It’s green.

There’s some kind of energy vortex on this corner.”

The Self-Transcendence runners being mostly European, July 4 went largely unremarked at the racecourse. The fields teemed with men engaged in various team sports. Flags hung limp in the cooling air as Madhupran and Abichal strolled past, each brandishing a Popsicle. A couple of Indian families spread blankets on the grassy margin by the bleachers in Joe Austin park, and chops on a clamshell barbecue threw gusts of meaty smoke into the paths of the vegetarian runners. At dusk, Sri Chinmoy arrived in a white jeep to dispense bananas.<sup>7</sup>

By moonlight, Joe Austin park was a place of desolate beauty. Traffic thrummed eastward undeterred, blanching the runners in a wash of halogen beams. On 168th Street, a man watered his lawn in the dark, while a few stray fireflies winked among the hedges of Edison High. I was given to understand that miracles sometimes visited Jamaica. A white woman in a sari told me that Sri Chinmoy had cured her of lupus. The runners, too, had recovered from injury and illness. “Shin splints that would stop an ordinary runner for weeks last only days,” insisted one of the disciples, another chiropractor, on loan from Chicago. “The will of the—if you allow me to say—soul conquers the will of the physical.” Witness Pranab, who clipped past me, murmuring into a dictaphone. He had left the racecourse for two hours to have his toenails removed, resuming the race at his usual pace as soon as he returned. “Now I have to soak my toes,” he said. “It’s a little more work.” His date with the podiatrist’s knife had cost him roughly eighteen miles.

Beyond the rooftops of Jamaica, the horizon throbbed with light, as of a millenarian firestorm engulfing Manhattan. Now and then a plume of colored sparks crested the tree line,

<sup>7</sup> The offering of sanctified food—called *prasad*—sometimes flummoxed visitors to the racecourse, as in late July, when the Guru made an offering of Granny Smith apples to a pair of emissaries from Russian TV. The reporter accepted with telegenic diplomacy, but the cameraman froze, plying his camera like a rifle trained on a buck. An hour later, both apples lay uneaten on a table cluttered with audiovisual equipment.

Queens County’s rejoinder to the thirtieth annual Macy’s Fireworks Spectacular with Lionel Richie and the New York Pops. I decided to buy a proper pair of running shoes.

“Without preparatory training . . . the most fatal injuries may be committed in attempting pedestrian feats.” Such was the counsel of *Beadle’s Dime Hand-Book of Pedestrianism*, published in 1867. On the cover of the thirty-two-page tract, a man wearing a sporty hat and gaiters trots across a sketchily rendered countryside. Mysteriously, he carries a riding crop. “In a mind upset by literary study,” the author urges, “the best plan, if practicable, is to give up the reading and writing entirely, for a time.” Duly warned, I toed the line by the weathered scoreboard on Joe Austin Way at a minute to six.

Ribbons of peach and pink banded the eastern horizon, giving the sky the look of a novelty cocktail. At dawn, the scene here was somber. The racers sat glumly on folding chairs or stretched against trees. Many of them doctored their feet with balms and tapes. Sri Chinmoy had returned from a trip to the Far East bearing gifts for the runners, ceremonial white bandannas emblazoned with the bloody sun of the Japanese flag. A few tied these souvenirs around their foreheads. They looked a little like bandages on a company of outnumbered and ill-equipped soldiers marching to certain death. One of the race directors called us to attention and we stood together, observing a moment of silence rendered incomplete by traffic sounds. Then we were off.

The pace was leaden. After five hours of stasis the body of the multi-day runner locks up like a rusty transmission. Madhupran alone advanced at his usual clip, lunging and working his arms like an animatronic cross-country skier. Within fifteen minutes he had lapped me. Sri Chinmoy visited the course at around 6:20, and his arrival had an immediate restorative effect on the disciples. Wearing a preppy pink-striped shirt, he circled the block three times in a blue Smart car, goosing little fanfares from the horn when he passed a group of rac-



ers. It was oddly exhilarating to see the Guru operate a car, particularly one he could have parked in a walk-in closet. The runners bowed their heads, touched their hearts, or waved, quickening their pace. "It's the same as if you like the author of a book and then you meet him in reality," a disciple explained. It was difficult to imagine John Updike inspiring this sort of reverence.

The Guru's drive-by was only the opening act in a morning lineup of music, poetry, and cheerleading. Two female choral groups staked out stretches of Abigail Adams Avenue, clapping and singing. Meanwhile, the sun had broken through the clouds, and commuters were tumbling groggily into cars to ford the Grand Central Parkway. When I'd asked her how she felt about Jamaica, Suprabha had told me, "If you use your imagination, you can feel as if you're running on a beautiful country road. You tune out the traffic, the motorcycles." Helmut, Madhupran's handler, echoed her advice. "This is the hardest race you can find. Very hard concrete. You should have it in your mind like an endless road. Don't see it as it is, a dirty sidewalk. You must have the fantasy to see it another way—you must see flowers, a beautiful forest with trees."

I tried to conjure these pastoral mirages as I ran. Here was the broad green sign directing motorists to Queens's Utopia Parkway. The same brown Honda had been parked outside Edison High for weeks. Eventually the summer-school contingent straggled in, glassy-eyed and injured to the sight of nylon-clad wraiths hustling up the block. I wished one of the runners would tell me how to clear my mind of all this urban wrack. After a morning of continuous locomotion, my legs were confused. Each step reverberated up the tibiae, delivering an unhappy shock to my knees. My stomach, too, rebelled. To the aspiring pedestrian, *Beadle's* prescribed a midday smorgasbord of roast beef, mutton, partridge, pheasant, or venison, along with one or two potatoes. No other vegetable was permitted. Short on fresh game, I snacked on nectarines and granola. Even so, I spent a good

deal of time locked in the piney, saunlike seclusion of a Port-O Let.

At around 1:30, I finished my forty-eighth circuit of the block, and a volunteer informed me that I had surpassed 26.2 miles. "You've run a marathon!" she announced. Was this my first? I admitted it was. She clapped her hands. I had transcended myself! Was I excited? My time of seven hours, twenty-five minutes left room for improvement, I felt. Nonetheless, I traded high fives with a few of the runners, who received the news variously with bemusement or wide-eyed gravity. Remembering Pheidippides, I took care to hydrate. Self-transcendence aside, I didn't intend to die in a pair of red nylon shorts.

By nightfall, I was circling Edison High in a trance. The sign for Utopia Parkway shone inscrutably in the darkness, beckoning me eastward toward parts unknown. As if afflicted by a kind of anatomical Stockholm syndrome, my legs bore me clockwise of their own accord, and I had the idea I could keep plodding forever. I was wrong. Blisters ruptured on the soles of both my feet, and every step became a slog through molten glass.

I drove home at geriatric speeds, unsure I'd be able to work the brake pedal in case of emergency. On the advice of a disciple, I sat for a long time in a scalding bath of Epsom salt. I had made eighty circuits of the block for a cumulative distance of 43.904 miles—six miles short of the required daily minimum. My base nature wanted aspirin and 10,000 BTUs of air-conditioning. What did my true nature want? I couldn't say.

A sense of giddy anticipation attended Madhupran's final push on the morning of July 22. LANXESS had dispatched a coiffed and cheerful stringer, who sat in the van interrogating Helmut on the champion's progress and typing what I assumed was a press release on a laptop.

"If I want to say that his diet consisted of da, da, da—" she prompted.

"Rice, sweet potatoes, coconut milk," Helmut replied. "And he ate every day one honeydew. And dinkel bread. No wheat. So. Now comes my horse. Don't forget my horse."

Near the Port-O Lets, a violinist serenaded an empty swath of sports fields. By Madhupran's penultimate lap, the throng of acolytes, friends, and confused passersby at the racecourse numbered about two hundred. That morning, Sri Chinmoy had written three new compositions in honor of Madhupran's success. Xeroxed sheet music was handed out, and men and women gathered in scrums along Joe Austin Way to rehearse. A blue ribbon bearing the gold-embossed legend SELF-TRANSCENDENCE RACES was strung across the sidewalk opposite a gauntlet of camera-wielding disciples.

Madhupran accelerated through his final quarter-mile shouldering a victory flag fringed with gold tassels, each stride an object lesson in the kinetics of belief. He had knocked more than a day off his own world record. When he crossed the line, Sri Chinmoy led the crowd in a triumphal sing-along. "The champion of champions/Am I," proclaimed the chorus. "In God's limitless pride sky/I fly."

Like his many thousands of poems, the Guru's songs are nothing if not pithy. After the disciples repeated the first song several times, they proceeded to the next. "In the world's longest bravest distance run/Who waves the victory flag?/Madhupran!/Madhupran!" The Guru clapped a metronomic beat against his knee. Whenever the singers fell silent, he beckoned for more. The third song was the longest, and the most popular:

I am the world's longest distance  
Daring and shattering runner  
My Supreme Lord's  
Sun-power Smile  
And his Moon-Bliss-Love  
Winner

Madhupran crooned along in his operatic baritone, clasping his plastic-sheathed bouquet like a beauty-pageant winner. Sri Chinmoy dispensed vanilla creme cookies and individually wrapped Keebler Club & Cheddar Sandwich Crackers, and then he left. The crowd dispersed, and the runners who had quit circling the block to watch Madhupran enter the record books returned to



the grind. Some had nine hundred miles ahead of them.

By the vans, an enterprising disciple scavenged for crumbs in an abandoned cardboard box. "They may be dregs," he said, smiling, "but they're the master's dregs." A kindly, heavyset Russian woman sat counting off laps. In the 1980s she had fled the "atheist state" of the Soviet Union for Texas, where she discovered transcendental meditation. Now she gazed mournfully up the block. She felt empty, she said. "It's always like this. You wait and wait for the event. Then in thirty minutes—it's history."

**I**n the last days of July, the tempo of the race changed. Wind jostled the trees, while in the park a woman herded leaves with an electric blower. Endgame had arrived. Sometimes two runners reached 3,100 miles in a day. Each finish triggered music and applause, but the excitement of Madhupran's victory was never quite matched. We sang the Guru's songs again and again, like a touring cast of *Godspell* at the end of a fifty-city run.

The Self-Transcendence Race was supposed to end on August 1, but Sri Chinmoy granted a week's extension so the laggards could finish. The last miles would prove the cruelest. Scattered power outages had afflicted Queens. To conserve energy in the stupefying heat of August, government buildings set their thermostats at a balmy 78 degrees, and the lights of Coney Island's totemic Parachute Jump went dark. So, too, NASDAQ's digital display in Times Square. Summer school was officially pronounced "optional." Mayor Bloomberg declared a heat emergency; later, the city would confirm a heat-related death toll of 140. I worried about the four runners still circling Joe Austin park.

By day fifty-eight, deep red circles bloomed on Abichal's cheeks. "I think sometimes even the runners ask, 'What am I doing here?'" he confessed. Often he would orbit the block for hours without glimpsing another racer, a phenomenon he called "the dark side of the loop." At night he veered into the fence outside Edison High. He had numb toes and a strange vertiginous feeling, as if the ground were rolling beneath his feet. Sometimes he dreamed

about the race. In the dreams somebody chased him around the block, or he was chasing someone else, he couldn't say which. He woke unrefreshed. "I just run all night," he said. "Round and round." The energy on the loop had changed. The race has a force, he explained, a power you feel at every level of your being. "Then when you cut the head off, it's gone."

Rathin Boulton from Australia crossed the finish line on August 7. He held his bouquet while a modest crowd sang and clapped. A few yards away the door of a white sedan hung open. Sri Chinmoy emerged wearing flip-flops, his striped shirt tucked into canary-yellow trunks, and made his halting way to the scoreboard.

Last year, Rathin had run 3,100 miles in fifty-six days, eleven hours. At the Guru's urging, one of the race directors read this figure aloud. Then he repeated Rathin's latest score of fifty-seven days and change. "This is—more?" the Guru asked.

There was nervous laughter from the gallery. Rathin had traveled 3,100 miles around a concrete block in Queens, but he had not transcended himself. The Guru sipped from a juice box while a disciple set up a microphone attached to a small public-address system. "How many years have you been on our path?" Chinmoy asked. "Ten years, Guru," Rathin answered. Chinmoy sat clutching his right knee, head bowed, as neighborhood kids passed by in jeans and baggy shorts. Then, in a warbling voice, he began to sing. "*Rathin, Rathin, Rathin, Rathin.*" I had the impression he was composing this number on the spot. Heedless of the roaring planes overhead, the disciples joined in, timidly at first but with mounting conviction, until the Guru produced a box of vanilla cookies and called them to order. It was snack time.

Afterward he indulged in a little postprandial lecturing. I dutifully recorded what I could, but the very first sentence confounded me. "Once upon a time," the Guru said, and a siren drowned him out. Whole paragraphs were lost in the muddle of ambient street noise, giving his remarks a Dadaist quality. I heard the phrases "unimaginable joy" and "peace blossoms." Chinmoy ac-

knowledgeed a man who had helped him organize a trip to New Zealand, where he had lifted a thousand sheep. His voice was breathy and sweet. "I am playing a flute for a kangaroo. My only audience is a kangaroo." He spoke at length about Lord Krishna, breaking off to quiz his disciples on their mastery of the Bhagavad-Gita. "In which chapter does Lord Krishna show his divine form to humans?" he asked. "Eleven," someone shouted. Wind buffeted the microphone. I made out the words "bodyguards" and "karate chop." Now and then the Guru paused for a bite of creme cookie, and sounds of mastication crackled from the P.A. My notes resembled a collection of haikus. Finally, the Guru stood and waved, padded to the white sedan still idling at the curb, and was spirited away.

On the loop, Abichal offered some perspective. The mind likes to grasp things, he told me; this is its nature. But reality cannot be grasped. A true master addresses the heart. To do so, he must short-circuit the student's intellect, a process sometimes calling for "special techniques." He speaks indirectly, in riddles, coaxing the student toward a more receptive state. It made a certain sense, but half the time I'd found the Guru simply inaudible. Abichal nodded. "It's like that for a lot of people," he said. "Even the disciples."

**B**y the late 1880s, the pedestrian craze had cooled. "The public may occasionally lose its head," the *New York Times* concluded, "but it is unsafe to assume that it will do so more than once or twice in the same direction. It rushed to see Rowell trot over 500 miles of sawdust because long-distance pedestrianism was a new thing." Slave to the god of novelty, the great unwashed had forsaken distance foot-racing for such au courant conveyances as the bicycle and the roller skate. A century later, the pedestrian has wandered into cultural oblivion, his feats relegated to microfilm archives and a few out-of-print sports chronicles.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Notably John Cumming's *Runners & Walkers and Ultramarathoning: The Next Challenge* by Tom Osler and Ed Dodd.



Edward Payson Weston clung doggedly to fame well into his senescence, but an accident brought his career to an unceremonious end in 1927. His glory days behind him, the great pedestrian was broke, sharing a Greenwich Village flat and begging for work in the pages of the *Times*. Eight days after he received a gift of \$30,000 from Anne Nichols, author of the popular Broadway comedy *Abie's Irish Rose*, Weston was pasted in the streets of New York by a taxicab. He was eighty-eight years old. For decades he had railed against the evils of the motorcar, an invention for loafers and slobs. Weston spent the balance of his life confined to a wheelchair. The age of pedestrians was dead.

I returned the next day to watch Abichal cross the finish line. The heat wave had broken, and he circled the block with a look of resignation. He would finish a week later than he'd hoped. "I feel joy," he said, but I couldn't shake the sense that past races had meant more to Abichal. As we walked against the stream of traffic on the parkway, he told me about a particularly grueling race he'd run a few years back. "I was so looking forward to the end. Dying, dying, dying. Then on the last lap—it all fell away." He made a little magician's flourish with his hand. "What I thought would be the goal just vanished, like a mirage. There was no goal. It didn't exist. I realized that my mind had been playing this trick. It was just another lap, same as all the other laps." This summer, Abichal had not transcended himself in precisely the way he'd imagined, but he would run again.

As we neared the diminished Base Camp with its skeleton crew of volunteers, Abichal's thoughts turned to the future of his sport. There was an upcoming 1,200K in Germany, the Deutschlandlauf; 2006 would see new six- and seven-day races in France and Greece. A note of hope entered his voice. "They said the marathon was impossible. Now hundreds of thousands run them. Maybe this is it."

At 10:20 P.M., a few disciples gave up tossing a Frisbee to watch Abichal

embark on his final lap. Someone had arranged two long files of tea candles leading to the finish line—the lights of Coldplay's "Fix You," come to guide him home. A bicycle horn bleated in the dark, and we called his name as he lumbered eastward bearing the Self-Transcendence banner in one hand and the Red Dragon of Wales in the other. An unexpected knot formed in my throat as Abichal walked gingerly across the line and accepted his flowers. After the usual singing, Abichal sat with a cake in his lap, while friends filed past to shake his hand, and then we stood in silence. Altogether, the turnout was about a quarter the size of Madhupran's. "Speech," somebody called. The brake lights of a passing car flashed, and a mild electrical current passed through the crowd. "Guru," came a whisper behind me. There was a collective turning of heads. "Guru's here?" "Abichal, I think Guru's here." But the car sped down the block. Pink and blue balloons jogged above Abichal's bowed head. His time was fifty-eight days, sixteen hours, twenty-two minutes, three seconds.

The next week Abichal met me for lunch at Smile of the Beyond, a vegetarian diner managed by one of the race directors. Suprabha had crossed the finish line the previous Thursday, and now the racecourse was empty. Some of the runners had already returned to the jobs they had left behind in their home countries. Others planned to hang around Jamaica for the Guru's seventy-fifth birthday party at the end of the month. The previous year, he had celebrated with a solo concert performance on seventy-four pianos. It would be difficult to top.

Abichal showed up twenty minutes late, his hair newly trimmed to a boyish wiffle—most likely at Perfection in the Head-World, the disciple-operated barbershop down the street. He looked ten years younger, but he walked on the legs of a senior citizen. It was strange to see Abichal in a restaurant. In the seven weeks I'd known him, I had almost never caught him sitting. Now that the struggle was past, he said, he

felt a constant sense of freedom. The race was like a weight he'd been carrying for months. He was relieved: not physically—although his body was recovering—but psychically. He intended to edit a poetry anthology. There was also his magazine and website. In December he would fly to Arizona to run Across the Years, the race that killed a man in 2004. He hadn't decided whether he would return to Jamaica next June. "Have to wait and see," he said. On a television screen in the corner, Sri Chinmoy lifted an airplane.

After lunch, Abichal offered to walk with me to the racecourse. His thoughts followed a meandering path. "For many of us, the mind is limited," he said. "It's useful, we need to use it, but it grasps at bits. Then it uses those bits to form a picture and acts as if the picture is reality." We lingered at the verge of the racecourse. He looked mistily at a trash can heaped with ice-cream wrappers and soda cans. "I still feel a connection to this bin. Sometimes it would be full to overflowing. Sometimes somebody would dump a big bag in." Abichal squinted up at the clouds. The light was different now, he said. The race starts just a week before the summer solstice, when the days are at their longest. We fell into a natural orbit around the block. "It's all the same," Abichal said. He pointed out features of the loop like a docent leading a cathedral tour. "Same bins, same cracks in the sidewalk." He nodded at a sapling by the high school. "This oak tree replaced a birch that was here a few years ago. You know what lives where. Blue flowers live at this corner. And a flower called a scarlet pimpernel, and yellow clover. This pine tree lives here. And little red flowers, too." Abichal crouched down to show me. Somebody had tossed an empty Newport box in the grass, alongside a foil printed with the words BOMB BAG. The flowers were minuscule, each blossom the size of a Q-tip. "There's still something here. I can feel my echo. Some trace of the experience." Abichal rounded the corner. "This is where the course flattens out. Now it starts to rise gently. In the past sometimes, I'd get a burst of energy here. You feel that you can run forever." ■