City man completes ultra marathon in S.A.

Thirty kilometres into the world’s largest and oldest ultra marathon, Aravind Kumar suffered an injury. It was so bad, the 27-year-old said, he wanted to quit. “I just wanted to go back to my room and sleep as the pain was unbearable,” he said.

But he put one foot in front of the other, and after 11 hours and 42 minutes, with just 18 minutes for the 12-hour deadline, he completed the 89-km race, becoming the only participant from Chennai, as well as the youngest from the country, to complete the Comrades Marathon in South Africa, this year.

Over 14,000 athletes from across the world participated in the ultra marathon, over hilly, unrelenting terrain from Pietermaritzburg to Durban, on June 1. “From India, there were 48 runners, and 36 completed it,” said Amit Sheth, country ambassador for the marathon.

Aravind, a human resources professional, very nearly didn’t make it to South Africa. His visa application ran into hurdles, as the authorities demanded he have a significant bank balance in order for clearance.

“When my boss found out, he gave me a cheque for Rs. 3 lakh. Just like that. I put it in my account, took a bank statement and sent it back to the visa authorities. I got my visa just three hours before departure,” he said. Throughout the race, Aravind’s family, his friends from Chennai Runners (a hobby group of running enthusiasts), and his colleagues tracked his progress online.

At the marathon, thousands of spectators lined the route, cheering the runners on. “I was wearing an India t-shirt, and there was constant support from the crowd, who shouted ‘Go India’. They wouldn’t let me stop,” he said.

At 60 km, in intense pain, Aravind had just one thought in mind. “I had a mental picture of reaching the finish line. I told myself, I must complete the race for my loved ones, if not for me,” he said.
At 400 metres before the finish line, some runners even carried others who couldn’t make it. On seeing the finish line, Aravind sprinted.

“I had dreamt of this every single day over the past year,” he said. People were crying with happiness at finishing, others were elated, but all were completely exhausted, he said.

According to Praveen Giriya of Chennai Runners, the other two participants from the city could not complete the marathon. “Ram Viswanathan missed the cut-off time by just a few minutes, at 82 km, and Shahid Kandirkar tripped and fell, suffering an injury,” he said.

For Aravind, the marathon was a life-changing experience.

The camaraderie he shared with runners from other countries and the inexplicable feeling of finishing the race, he said, would always stay with him.

*Aravind Kumar battled an injury to complete the 89-km race in 11 hours and 42 minutes*