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# Going the distance

At this year's London marathon, Fauja Singh aims to beat his best time of six hours. It seems a modest ambition – but then, he is 93. Anne Johnson finds out what drives him.

He trains in a calm, measured way, maintaining a steady pace like a man entirely in control of himself and his destiny. He likes routine and he runs 9 or 10 miles a day, every day, clocking up 70 miles a week. There is nothing particularly unusual about that, you think – there are plenty of people who take their training seriously – until you discover that this man is 93 years old.

He ran in the London event for the first time at the age of 89, with no course preparation. He runs no extended distances in advance, just small circuits on the local pavements, building up his endurance.

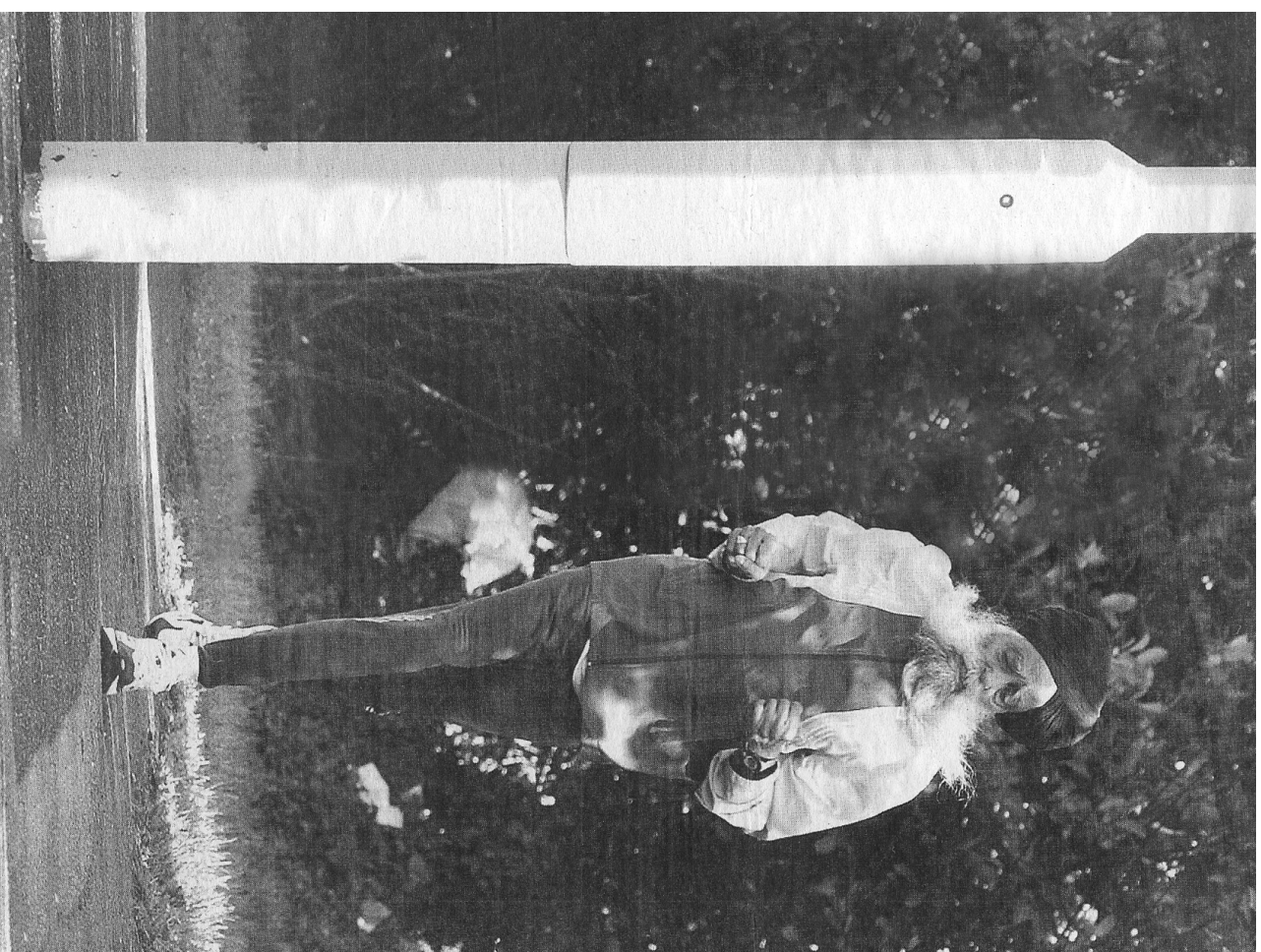
He looks the picture of health. When I saw him, he ran several laps of his pavement circuit at 15 minutes each and was not even breathless. He keeps his weight to just eight stone which, for his height of six feet, is almost nothing. To keep healthy for marathons he eats a basic vegetarian diet, doesn't drink or smoke, and avoids new foods in case they upset his system.

Surprisingly, Fauja Singh hasn't been running for very long. He took it up when his wife died 11 years ago, and since then it has been the main focus of his life.

After living most of his life in India, he came to Redbridge in Essex after his wife's death to join his youngest son and his family. As a young man he was a competitive runner, and when he decided to take it up again after his bereavement, he initially thought of running as therapy. Then it became his passion.

It wasn't long before he was introduced to Harmander Singh who took on the role of being Fauja's trainer, although training does not involve a proper track; Fauja simply trains by running on his local streets.

He began by running short distances – then five kilometres, then 10 km, then 20 km. He first saw the London marathon on television and fancied having a go, although he didn't at first quite understand the distance involved.



In all, he has done six marathons – 4 in London and one each in Toronto and New York. When he runs in London, he is hoping to come in below the six hour mark – having crossed the finishing line last year in his best time of six hours and 43 seconds.

Fauja is intensely competitive, and loves the fact that he has beaten the London Marathon record for his age group – runners in their 90s – every year. So his pace may be steady, but it's obviously not quite as slow as it looks. "He loves being a star," Harmander says. "He values being recognised and he sees it as raising the profile of Sikhs."

Fauja's desire to win and set records is the driving force in his running. The idea of finishing a marathon with thousands of younger people behind him is clearly an appealing one and, ultimately, what keeps him going.

He also believes that his running can help others. Currently he runs for Bliss, a charity that helps premature babies; he sometimes also runs under the banner of the British Heart Foundation, in honour of some of his jogging friends who have taken up running after heart attacks.

Last year Adidas also signed him up for its 'Nothing is Impossible' advertising campaign. He won't reveal how much money the deal involves, but says that anything he makes goes to charity. But can so much strenuous exercise be sensible at his age?

Harmander admits that Fauja probably needs to take it slightly easier from now on. If in April he crosses the finishing line in his seventh marathon as undefeated master in his age group, he surely has nothing else to prove. But I came away not quite convinced. The world record for the oldest person to run a marathon is 98, and Fauja would dearly like to beat that. So he is hoping to make a one-off comeback in the 2009 London marathon.

The prospect of becoming not only the fastest but the oldest in his group must be almost irresistible.