

FITNESS & WELL-BEING

The tracks of her years



After taking up running at the grand old age of 93, Indian grandmother Man Kaur has become a record-breaking star of track and field. Now 102, she shows no signs of slowing down

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For a culture that prides itself on respect for the elderly, India has paid scant attention to a 102-year-old woman in Punjab who still competes in the World Masters Games around the globe, clocking up records in multiple events.

Sitting up in bed in her spartan, partially furnished two-room flat on the Punjabi University campus in Patiala, wrapped up in a duvet against the winter cold, Man Kaur lives an unsung life.

There has been limited media coverage of her feats, no magazine profiles, no interviews, no awards – little public recognition at all, in fact, of her astonishing achievements.

Kaur used to lead the average life of an elderly Punjabi woman in Chandigarh. Widowed, her life revolved around her children (in their 60s and 70s) and grandchildren. She began running at 93 when her eldest son, Gurdev Singh, 79, urged her to take it up.

Singh, a retired civil servant from the Punjab Forest Department and a widower himself, is passionate about athletics. For 25 years, he has been participating in the World Masters Games, held every four years, with its philosophy of “sports for all” for people of all ages. He has bagged 80 medals of his own. At the events, he used to see women in their 70s and 80s participating in track events.

“I said, why don’t you run? There is nothing wrong with you physically. You have no health problems, no knee problems, no blood pressure, no heart problem,” he says, describing his question to his mother.

Kaur took up running – and loved it. She won her first medal in 2010 at the Chandigarh Masters Athletics meeting where she participated in the sprint events. “I felt happy running,” she says simply. In the 100 metres, she clocked a new record, finishing in just over one minute. In the 200 metres, she also set a new mark of two minutes and 29 seconds.

Practising was difficult. Of the four universities in northern Punjab state, only one – Punjabi University – has an athletics track. There was no facility near their home in Chandigarh. A year ago, mother and son were offered the tiny, second-floor apartment on the Punjabi University campus in Patiala so that they could use the track. This is the only official help they have had from the authorities.

Singh has been spending his savings to finance their trips to the Masters events. “I have about 400,000 rupees [HK\$48,600] left now. What we are going to do when that runs out is something I don’t know,” he says.

The second floor is hardly suitable for a centenarian, and there is no lift. But it was the only flat available and they took it happily to be close to the track. They share the bedroom because in the second room, they grow wheatgrass – high in antioxidants, vitamins and minerals. Kaur has two tablespoons of wheatgrass juice every



day. In the tiny kitchen separating the two rooms, Singh prepares his mother’s meals. One staple is the savoury pancakes he makes twice a day, from a combination of sprouted black chickpeas and sprouted organic wheat.

He grinds the two into a thick paste, adding some spinach or another vegetable, which he then cooks on a griddle. Kaur has three of these for lunch and three for dinner, along with vegetables or pulses cooked in the traditional Indian way, though with little oil or spices. Another staple is a glass of kefir – a fermented yogurt drink – every day.

“I avoid junk food. I hardly ever have tea or coffee or soft drinks. No cakes or biscuits. No fried things, and no sweets,” she says.

She stopped eating meat 20 years ago after reading the Hindu religious text the Bhagavad Gita (although she is a Sikh). “It said eating animal flesh was wrong and I stopped. I don’t even eat eggs,” she says.

Kaur prays in the morning and listens to religious songs at night. “The songs relax me so much I don’t need to do yoga or meditate,” she says.

Neither has any interest in television. Singh reads books on healthy living. Kaur doesn’t read much any more, but her eyesight and hearing are fine. She speaks little, but when she does, her voice is strong and steady. She is mentally alert.

Asked the secret of her longevity, mobility and fitness, Kaur says she doesn’t know, but suspects it is crucial to be physically active. Throughout her entire life, she has cooked, cleaned, washed and ironed. “Even today, every day, after my bath, I wash my own clothes. I think it’s better to do all your chores yourself because your body stays supple and fit that way,” she says.

Her husband, Ranjit, died at 102 and was also physically active, cycling everywhere in his old age.



She always runs at exactly the same speed. She never goes faster or slower

GURDEV SINGH, ON THE SECRET OF HIS MOTHER’S SUCCESS

She also sews. While talking, she pulls out random pillow cases from under her duvet that she has made for relatives and friends.

At last year’s Auckland World Masters Games, Kaur was the only participant from India in the centenarian category. The average age of athletes in the World Masters is 45. At Auckland, she won the 100 metres in one minute and 14 seconds, taking the 17th gold medal of her career. After a friend encouraged her to try the javelin and shot-put a few years ago, Kaur also competes in these sports. She made it into the Guinness World Records for her javelin throw of five metres and 12 centimetres in Auckland.

“In New Zealand, there was a media scrum for her. There was a dinner in her honour. Everyone wanted to talk to her, and she was made a fuss of. She was taken to speak to children at three schools to inspire them and answer questions,” Singh says.

“Here in Punjab, I asked senior sports officials if they would like her to participate in races in schools, to give children a chance to interact with her, but got no reply.”

Her medals and trophies from Masters Games are perched on top of the small fridge that stands in the middle of the bedroom and on a top shelf of the room.

A dignified, gentle man devoted to his mother, Singh doesn’t sound at all bitter about the lack of public recognition for his mother. Puzzled, yes, but not bitter.

He was also puzzled when, last September, the Chinese embassy in New Delhi denied him and his mother a visa to attend the Asian Masters Athletics Championships. “We had a letter from the Masters organisation inviting us, but they wanted a letter from the organisers in China, which we didn’t have,” says Singh.

Now, mother and son are gearing up for September’s World Masters in Spain.

Although she has been a bit under the weather, Kaur won’t tolerate the idea of not getting up for at least a few minutes of running, particularly as a weak sun has managed to push through the clouds. She practises daily. On some days she goes to the gym to do weight training. Singh helps her with her shoes and a spine-support belt, and she is ready to go down the stairs unaccompanied, looking fit and steady on her feet.

At the nearby track, she runs for a few minutes with Singh by her side. “She is so funny, she always runs at exactly the same speed. She never changes it, never goes faster or slower, not even slightly,” he says with a chuckle.

Back in her room, where she is not in the least bit breathless after climbing the two flights of stairs, Kaur concentrates, trying to think of useful advice for readers.

“The key is to be physically active and have a clear conscience. Be honest and treat people well. Don’t harm anyone,” she says.

HITS & MYTHS SASHA GONZALES

How making to-do lists reduces anxiety and ensures a better night’s sleep

And the more complex the agenda the quicker you will fall asleep, research suggests

What keeps you awake until the early hours? If you answered, “Trying to remember what I need to do tomorrow” or, “Worrying about things that need to be done”, read on.

New research from Baylor University in Texas, in the United States, found that people who don’t write to-do lists worry more about unfinished tasks and have difficulty falling asleep at night.

“We live in a 24/7 culture in which our to-do lists seem to be constantly growing and causing us to worry about unfinished tasks at bedtime,” says Dr Michael Scullin, director of the university’s Sleep Neuroscience and Cognition Laboratory. “Most people just cycle through their to-do lists in their heads, and so we wanted to explore whether the act of writing them down could counteract nighttime difficulties with falling asleep.”

The study, which was published in

January in the American Psychological Association’s *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, was conducted on 57 healthy university students, aged 18 to 30. The subjects were split into two groups, with one instructed to write a to-do list for the next few days, and the other group, a list of tasks they had completed over the previous few days.

Both groups were given five minutes to make their lists and were instructed to sleep at 10.30pm. As the subjects slept overnight in the controlled sleep laboratory, researchers monitored their brain activity using electrodes. The results revealed that the students who wrote to-do lists fell asleep significantly faster than those who wrote about their completed activities. Interestingly, the more detailed the to-do list, the faster the subjects fell asleep.

“The take-home message from the study is that writing works,” says Scullin, who is also an assistant professor of psychology and

neuroscience. “Writing might reduce worry because, once they have a list on paper, people don’t feel that they have to rely on their brains to remember what needs to be done.

“Another idea is that people are worried about these tasks, but as they begin to write them down, they realise that they will be able to get everything done and will therefore stop worrying about it.”



He says there is another theory, that any task that is unfinished will rest at a heightened level of cognitive activation in your brain. “Perhaps writing down the task is akin to mentally checking off items, thereby reducing cognitive activation,” he says.

Hongkonger Carrie Chan relies on detailed to-do lists to stay on top of her work and personal tasks. She says that her lists are a means for her to clear her mind and “offload” her worries.

“I divide a Post-it note into four quadrants, each one dedicated to

specific tasks related to my job, my professional networking, my volunteer work, and my personal aspirations,” says the 42-year-old.

“I always aim to accomplish these tasks within 24 to 48 hours. If I don’t manage to complete a task within 48 hours, I’ll move it to the next Post-it note. The same goes for tasks I need to follow up on. If something’s a priority, I’ll underline it or draw a star next to it. And, when I complete a task, I cross it off immediately.”

Chan, who works in property development project management, says if she didn’t have a to-do list, her mind wouldn’t be able to stop thinking about, or trying to recall, specific, urgent or last-minute tasks. As a result, she would find it impossible to focus on anything else during the day or relax enough to be able to fall asleep at night.

“Before leaving the office at the end of a work day, I’ll write down the tasks that need to be done the next day, and I don’t think about them until I’m back at work the next morning,” she explains. “Just that simple act of writing a list

alleviates my anxiety, which in turn makes for a better night’s sleep.”

If your to-do list is made up of big, seemingly insurmountable tasks that make you feel overwhelmed just thinking about them, it might help to break each one up into smaller, more specific goals or tasks that you can easily tackle every day.

Instead of having “clean the flat” as one massive task to complete in one day, you may want to try cleaning just one room every day until your entire flat is clean. This idea is based on what Gestalt psychology calls the Zeigarnik effect, that people remember uncompleted or interrupted tasks better than completed tasks.

Every time you complete a mini-goal, you’ll feel a rush of pleasure and satisfaction, which will motivate you to repeat the process all over again the next day. With less daunting to-dos on your list and a greater desire to see them through, you’ll have less anxiety on the brain and feel more relaxed – just what you need to help you drift off to dreamland.