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The Long Run: Santoshi Shrestha's Pursuit of a Sporting Life

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The women's 10,000-metre final at the 2019 South Asian Games came down to a fraction of a second. After 25 laps in Kathmandu, Santoshi Shrestha and India's Kavita Yadav reached the line almost together. Shrestha leaned, stopped her watch and waited.

The timing showed 35 minutes 7.94 seconds. The margin was one hundredth of a second. Shrestha had become the first Nepali woman to win an athletics gold medal at the South Asian Games.

The finish supplied a perfect sporting image: effort compressed into a single line, the home crowd and a result decided by centimetres. But the value of Shrestha's career lies in everything

before and after that moment. Distance running rewards repetition more than drama. Its real setting is the early morning, the quiet road and the session completed when no medal is visible.

From Dhading to the track

Shrestha comes from Jwalamukhi in Dhading, a hill district where walking long distances is part of ordinary life for many families.

That background can build endurance, but it does not automatically create an athlete. Competitive running requires coaching, nutrition, recovery, shoes, access to tracks and the confidence to treat sport as serious work.

She did not begin as a marathon specialist. Her early competitions were in middle- and long-distance track events, where pace is learned through laps rather than roads. The 5,000 and 10,000 metres demand an uncomfortable balance: run too cautiously and the leaders leave; attack too early and the final kilometres expose the mistake.

Training under coach Raghu Raj Onta helped turn endurance into race craft. Sessions had to build speed without losing strength. The athlete who would later run a marathon first learned how to judge a rival's movement, hold position and finish hard.

Shrestha also continued her education, completing postgraduate study in public administration. The combination matters. Nepali

athletes often train without the secure professional structures common in wealthier sporting systems. Study and employment are not side interests; they can be necessary forms of protection against a short or uncertain career.

A race decided at the line

The 2019 South Asian Games were held in Nepal, placing local athletes under unusual attention. Competing at home can provide energy, but it also removes anonymity. Relatives, officials, supporters and critics are all close enough to see the result.

In the 10,000 metres, Shrestha stayed with Yadav through the long tactical middle of the race. Neither could create a decisive gap. The contest tightened over the final lap and became a sprint between two tired distance runners.

Her gold carried more than individual significance. Nepal had won South Asian athletics medals before, but a woman had not taken gold in the discipline at the Games. Shrestha's victory altered that record and gave younger runners a recent example rather than a distant promise.

It also demonstrated the narrowness of elite competition. One hundredth of a second is smaller than the time required for a thought. Years of training were judged by a movement at the line. The result celebrated speed, but it also depended on remaining

close enough for the final lean to matter.

What happens after gold

A major medal can create the impression that an athlete has arrived. For a distance runner, there is no permanent arrival. Fitness fades when training stops, and the body must absorb thousands of kilometres without breaking down.

Shrestha continued to race on the track and road. She won national titles, lowered Nepali benchmarks and began extending her competitive range. The half marathon became a bridge: long enough to demand fuel and patience, fast enough to punish small errors in pace.

In 2023, she competed internationally in Europe and at the Asian Games in Hangzhou. A sixth-place finish in the Asian Games 10,000 metres placed her among the continent's leading runners, even as the gap between South Asian success and Asian medals remained clear.

That gap is not only a measure of talent. East African and Japanese distance-running systems, among others, are supported by deep competition, specialised coaching and regular high-level races. Nepali runners often have fewer opportunities to test pace in strong fields. Travelling to an event involves visas, funding and selection processes before the race begins.

Moving to the marathon

The marathon changes the relationship between speed and survival. At 42.195 kilometres, the early stages can feel controlled even when the pace is unsustainable. The cost arrives later, after glycogen falls, muscles tighten and concentration becomes harder.

Shrestha's move to the distance required more than longer runs. Nutrition during the race had to be practised. Recovery between sessions became as important as the sessions themselves. Every small problem—blisters, stomach trouble, a missed drink—could grow across more than two hours on the road.

Her Olympic opportunity came through Nepal's place in the women's marathon at the Paris 2024 Games. It was her first Olympics and the largest race of her life. Paris designed a demanding course inspired by the route of the 1789 Women's March on Versailles, with severe climbs and descents that challenged even the world's best marathoners.

Shrestha finished in 2 hours 55 minutes 6 seconds, a personal best, and placed 79th. The position did not produce a medal headline, but finishing an Olympic marathon on that course was a significant competitive act. She became part of a small group of Nepali women who have carried the country into the Games' most demanding endurance event.

She later carried Nepal's flag at the closing ceremony. The gesture offered a different image from the 2019 finish: not a lean decided by timing equipment, but an athlete walking with the national colours after completing the longest race on the Olympic programme.

Running for a country with few tracks

Nepal appears naturally suited to distance running. Its terrain, altitude and culture of walking are frequently offered as explanations for athletic potential. Potential, however, is not a system.

Runners need safe places to train, reliable competitions, sports medicine and coaches who can plan across seasons. Women need additional security and social support, particularly when training requires early mornings, travel and clothing that can attract unwanted scrutiny. A medal won despite missing structures should not be used as proof that those structures are unnecessary.

Shrestha's career shows what patient coaching and individual discipline can produce. It also reveals the burden placed on athletes who must help organise the conditions of their own success. They are expected to train, represent the country, find resources and explain why the sport deserves attention.

Distance running rarely receives the commercial support given to cricket or football. Its competitions are easy to overlook between major Games. Yet it is one of the most accessible sports for young people. The basic movement requires no facility, but progression to elite level does. Investment can turn a child who runs to school into an athlete who understands pacing, strength and recovery.

The discipline of ordinary days

Shrestha has described reading as part of her athletic life. The connection is natural. Both require sustained attention without immediate reward. A book is completed page by page; endurance is built session by session.

This steadiness distinguishes her public story from the usual language of sudden inspiration. She did not become an Olympian through one brave decision. The path ran through school, local competition, coached training, a South Asian title, national records, international races and the gradual expansion from track to marathon.

There were also results that did not meet expectations. Distance runners learn to interpret failure precisely. A poor race may come from pacing, heat, illness, insufficient recovery or simply a stronger field. The useful response is neither excuse nor shame, but adjustment.

At the highest level, that learning never ends. Age can improve endurance through experience even as recovery becomes more demanding. Shrestha entered her thirties with an Olympic marathon completed and a body of work across several distances. The question was no longer whether she belonged in international competition, but what resources would allow the next improvement.

Beyond the finish line

The 2019 photograph remains central because it captured a historic first. Its danger is that it can make the story appear finished. Gold was not the conclusion; it was a checkpoint.

Shrestha's career continued onto unfamiliar roads, through a pandemic that disrupted competition, into European races, an Asian Games final and the hills of the Paris Olympic course. Each step demanded a willingness to start again at a distance where earlier success offered no guarantee.

For Nepal, her journey provides a practical argument for supporting women's athletics. Results arrive when talent is given time. A runner may need years before a regional medal, then more years before an Olympic start. Short funding cycles and attention that appears only after victory cannot match the nature of the sport.

The long run is built from ordinary mornings. It is shoes tied before sunrise, a measured pace, another lap and the decision to return the next day. Santoshi Shrestha's most famous race ended by one hundredth of a second. Her sporting life has been made from all the time that came before it—and all the kilometres that followed.

Featured image: Track-running scene. Illustrative photograph from Unsplash, used under the Unsplash free-use licence.

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