

THE MOUNTAINS ARE CALLING AND

I Must Go

Text by Hargaven Singh Gill • Photos by Mental Muscle

Mental Muscle and its conception

“Mental Muscle” aims to raise public awareness of mental illnesses that burden Singaporeans, highlight the need for social support for these individuals, and dispel some of the social stigma surrounding them. Our team of six students from NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (NUS Medicine), comprising Ho Jun Kiat, Huang Juncheng, Keith Ching Wei Jie, Navkaran Singh, Thaddaeus Tan Jun Kiat and me, travelled to Kathmandu, Nepal, from 18 to 25 December 2016. There, we ran along the Kathmandu Valley Rim, covering a distance of 200 km in five days – making us the first in history to complete such a trail as a team. Our intention was to undertake a mentally and physically demanding race (hence the name “mental” and “muscle”) to draw attention to the project and ongoing outreach efforts.

Preparation and milestones

Our team is the second batch to undertake such a challenge for this cause. Previously, a group of four medical students successfully ran the 250-km Sahara Race through the Namibia Desert.

With a tight timeline of four months, our team trained hard for the trail, while juggling schoolwork and the administrative tasks of our project. The key events leading up to our race included the Newton Challenge (32 km), The North Face 100® (100 km) and the Standard

Chartered Marathon Singapore (42 km). During those races, we each carried backpacks weighing five to eight kilograms to prepare us for the trail in Kathmandu, where we would be carrying our own water, food supplies and gear throughout the run.

We aimed to raise \$25,000 for our project, with funds being channelled primarily to the YouthReach division of the Singapore Association for Mental Health (SAMH). We strived to meet this goal by reaching out to friends, corporate organisations, charity events and publicity platforms.

With a larger team than last year and a shorter time span, the toughest part of preparation was in acquiring equipment and sponsorships. We went knocking on the doors of many companies with our team manifestos in hand and despite many rejections, the team was not dismayed because we knew that those struggles we faced paled in comparison to those faced by our peers with mental health illnesses.

During our preparation, we were fortunate to have the guidance of our mentor, A/Prof Tay Sook Muay (Department of Anaesthesiology, Singapore General Hospital). Her department and institution funded part of the operational and race costs, and aided us when our project hit a roadblock. We were also fortunate to be guided by Singapore's top marathoner, Dr Mok Ying Ren, and Dr Kumaran S/O Rasappan (who summited Mount Everest, both

of whom shared their expertise on running and managing Nepal's terrain. Although this project is not officially under the purview of the school, the Dean's Office shared their expertise on framing safety measures and organisational frameworks for a smoother execution of our project. We also had supportive friends who trained with us, actively disseminated our outreach efforts, and contributed time and money to our cause.

Kathmandu Valley Rim

Upon arrival at Tribhuvan International Airport, we took a 30-minute drive to our accommodation in Thamel – the heart of Kathmandu's tourism industry. It was bittersweet having to leave this tourist hotspot in less than 24 hours while knowing that we would return to this reward after our five days of labour.

Raj and Narayan, the two ultramarathoners acting as our leads on the run, met us for dinner on the first evening and we were swept away by their stories. Raj completed a 1,076-km marathon in 17 days, and Narayan *accidentally* finished as a second runner-up in a prominent UK marathon, beating hundreds of participants. Physical limits clearly did not apply to them.

The trail run started promptly at 7.15 am on Day 2 of our arrival. Within minutes, our team saw what it meant to be two of the Nepal's top ultramarathoners as we quickly lost sight of our running leads. Despite slowing to our pace and running 200 km, they did not

break a sweat or sustain any form of injury.

No amount of training could have fully prepared us for the unpredictable terrain and the frequent elevation changes varying between 1,300 m to 2,600 m. There was a mix of gravel, sand, mud, vegetation and roads amid upslopes and downslopes. Despite the challenges, our time was filled with laughter and camaraderie, knowing that we are a team fighting for the same cause. Our favourite moments included the time we ran on the ridge lines and when we got lost on the third night. On both occasions, we did not know the destination or how long more the trail would last. However, when we gave up the need for certainty and trusted in those shepherding the team, we learnt to live fully in the present and in the company of those who mattered.

"There is magic in these mountains", Raj would say, and he was quite right. Running on the ridge lines, away from the buzz of the city, provided a quiet respite for our minds to reminisce as 2016 drew to a close. Being at the highest points of Kathmandu allowed us to transcend our personal limits and worries, and acquire new perspectives to bring forth into 2017.

Outreach and outcomes

Is this the end of our journey? Certainly not. Completing this adventure marked the start of another chapter of our lives and sparked our passion for trail

running. It is, and will always be, an enlightening experience to watch the grace at which trail runners propel themselves onward despite fatigue; for isn't life about plunging our next step forward with courage and tenacity while leaving behind a trail of footprints for others to follow?

After successfully completing the five-day Kathmandu Valley Rim run, we were thankful to be home in time for Christmas. Our team quickly turned our focus to our fourth year professional examinations as well as outreach efforts – conducting talks and workshops on mental health awareness and the development of mental resilience with junior colleges. We are also conducting interviews with individuals enrolled in the programmes carried out by SAMH.

In the past five months, we reached out to around 70,000 individuals via Facebook alone. Online outreach efforts will include interviews with individuals with mental health illnesses, and quizzes created around their stories to engage the public.

Alongside publicity and outreach efforts, we continue our fundraising efforts. We are progressing towards our goal of \$25,000, but we are not stopping there. Our team will give it our best shot to champion this meaningful cause: raising awareness for mental health.

Many of us may have experienced moments of fatigue and despair, where we may be

constantly fighting to stay afloat. In such times, assurance that things are going to get better is often what we need. It is the reason for what we do and that provides us strength, and our team would like you to be a part of that reason, as we venture forth in our efforts.

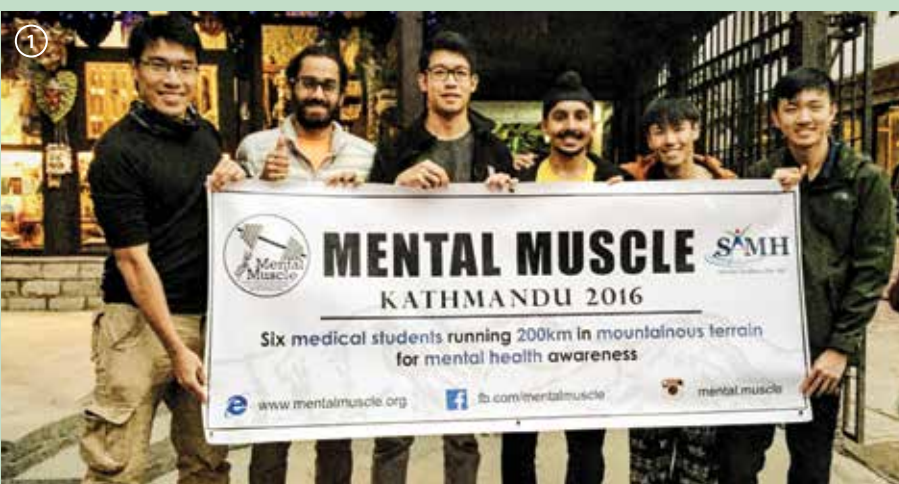
For more information on Mental Muscle, check out the website: <http://www.mentalmuscle.org/> or follow us on Facebook: <http://facebook.com/mentalmuscle>. ♦

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Legend

1. The team feeling joyous while holding up our project banner after completing the 200 km trail
2. The team having a memorable final dinner at the same restaurant as their first meal in Nepal



Hargaven Singh Gill is a fourth year medical student at NUS Medicine. He has a passion for rugby and tries to incorporate that same enthuse into other aspects of his life. He likes to hike and meet new friends on the trail, or spend the day with a good cup of coffee and book in hand.

