



Run Milind, Run

The road to success is on the footpaths. To run is to breathe. That’s Milind Soman for you. India’s poster boy of good health and fitness, with good looks thrown in for good measure

Text & Photographs: **Farzana Contractor**



Casual, that’s Milind’s style alright. The attitude is in the eyes!

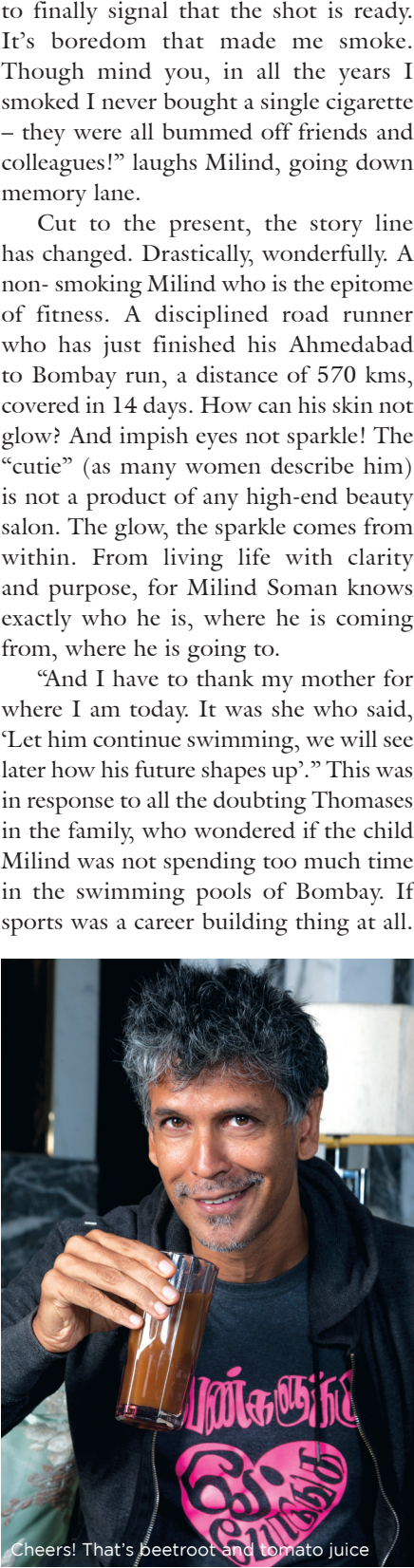
Now here is a man who is totally clear-cut in his thinking. He knows his mind, he understands his body. He has evolved. From the days he smoked 30 cigarettes a day and devoured a quarter kg of solid chocolate in one go. When he partied all night long and did everything that went with the premise of partying hard. When days were short and the nights, endless. When he along with the beautiful Madhu Sapre was hauled in a court of law for obscenity. The crime? The two posing, in a light clinch, for a camera. Wearing nothing but shoes, with an equally good looking python wrapped around them, in what can be termed nothing but an advertising coup, shot so aesthetically. It was an ad for *Tuff Shoes* and the case went on for 12 years.

“I really can’t believe we, I, could be so reckless. Though I am not denying it was so much fun. But that was like 20 years ago. Smoking happened no thanks to all those ad films and movie shoots. When you are hanging around the sets, waiting for the lights to come on, cameras to roll and the art director





I look cool and I know it!



Cheers! That's beetroot and tomato juice

to finally signal that the shot is ready. It's boredom that made me smoke. Though mind you, in all the years I smoked I never bought a single cigarette – they were all bummed off friends and colleagues!” laughs Milind, going down memory lane.

Cut to the present, the story line has changed. Drastically, wonderfully. A non- smoking Milind who is the epitome of fitness. A disciplined road runner who has just finished his Ahmedabad to Bombay run, a distance of 570 kms, covered in 14 days. How can his skin not glow? And impish eyes not sparkle! The “cutie” (as many women describe him) is not a product of any high-end beauty salon. The glow, the sparkle comes from within. From living life with clarity and purpose, for Milind Soman knows exactly who he is, where he is coming from, where he is going to.

“And I have to thank my mother for where I am today. It was she who said, ‘Let him continue swimming, we will see later how his future shapes up’.” This was in response to all the doubting Thomases in the family, who wondered if the child Milind was not spending too much time in the swimming pools of Bombay. If sports was a career building thing at all.

If studying to be an engineer was not a better prospect... Milind shakes his head, narrating this. And I know why.

He did study engineering, but it was his swimming which shaped his life. He was a national champ who represented Maharashtra from age nine to 23. It was this early awakening to the joy of being in a healthy body that prompted him in pursuing all other physical activity; which made him a marathon runner, which gave him the title, Iron Man, which made him enjoy his bread and butter!

That Milind was a Shivaji Park boy, where sports does flourish, thanks to the *maidan* near where he stays, that all four of his grandparents were doctors and dad a scientist with Bhabha Atomic and mom a college lecturer, have all helped immensely in contributing to the overall ‘product’ that is Milind. “Sports won’t get him anywhere!” got thrown out of the window,” Milind throws back his head and laughs. Well, he is entitled to the last laugh.

At 51, Milind is, by the grace of God and his own hardwork, fighting fit. A lean, strong body, a face with no traces of any wrinkles, understated in attire, with an air of ease and casualness, he is as comfortable in his skin as he is confident in his modest *chappal* sandals. He sits on a high perch that I tell him to jump up on while I go on shooting him and conducting the interview from behind the camera. And while I do so, he keeps swinging his legs, like a boy of 12. And I can’t help but think, he really is young in mind and heart, for he is who he is. That he lives life as simply and honestly as he can.

So as we sit, talk, shoot, eat, catch up from two decades ago, in the discreet lobby lounge of Marine Plaza on Marine Drive in Bombay, I happily rediscover Milind. All this at 6 am when the world is pretty much asleep, or just waking up.

“I am pretty much in tune with myself. If I don’t enjoy something I don’t do it. If I don’t like someone, I stay away from that person. I don’t travel for leisure or pleasure, everything for me is leisure



No perch too high for our cover guy!

and pleasure. I am thankful to life for everything and I am very content with all that I have got.” Milind does not follow a life of restrictions, he goes with the flow. He says, quite simply, he does what needs to be done. He follows his inner dictats.

So I ask him about running barefoot, “How did that happen. M F Husain walked barefoot, but you run! Hurts?” “Not really,” he replies, “See, I ask myself a lot of questions when I am running. I kind

of talk to myself in my head. And one day, it was after nine years of running, when I was doing a 20-km run in Lonavala, I took off my shoes. I ran the last half km in my socks. I liked it. Taking off my shoes, kind of refreshed me.” The experience encouraged him to take off his socks, too, the next time, “And I noticed I liked it even more. I discovered it changed my entire balance, head to toe, my feet felt energised being in direct contact with the earth, the

signal from the ground was a nice feeling, running felt like dancing. For six years now I have been running barefoot.” Well, life comes a full circle. The one thing this model is not going to advertise anymore is running shoes. Life is not ‘*Tuff*’, anymore!

His philosophy of doing what needs to be done and without restrictions also extends to his eating habits. That is something that everyone wants to know about sports people. Milind seems pretty



It's three kilos of fruit every morning for Milind, no tea, coffee or milk!

cool about it. No fuss, no hardcore discipline.

“I am now a vegetarian. But if I have to I will eat fish, or let’s say, shellfish. I don’t believe in taboo of any kind.”

So you want to know what is breakfast for Milind? It’s three kilos of fruits, every morning. “But that’s all, no tea, coffee or milk with it...” He laughed at the incredulous look on my face. And now I did remember when he had jokingly scoffed at the sleepy-eyed waiter who brought us some cut fruit earlier on. “*Kya hai ye, fruit plate. Jao fruit platter lao!*”

So, Milind’s daily breakfast is; one full large papaya, half a watermelon (the big Indian one, not the Thailand kind), eight to 10 green bananas with peanut butter (“I love peanut butter, I make it myself”), and any fruits that may be in season – like four or five mangoes in summer! And after a couple of hours he eats either a *dosa*, *idli* or some *upma*.

“Don’t look so shocked,” he tells me, “any normal person can metabolise that, he won’t store any fat, unless he suffers from some external factor which hinders the process,” he calmly specifies. By which he means stress of any kind, or if you are a couch potato.

For lunch and dinner, he eats, *dal*, *roti*, *sabzi* but not in breakfast quantity! And if he feels like he will eat *sev puri*, *ragda pattice*, even pizza. He loves street food and thinks he munches something all day long. But he can’t recall when he last ate biscuits or chips. He stays away from processed food, hybrid fruits and sugar. He will have chefs make *Crème Brûlée* in jaggery, the darker the better. But he can live on various *khichdis* and loves the ones his mom, Usha makes.

And since he adapts, when travelling if he can’t find decent veg food, he could dive into meats; pork or vension are the preferred choices. Or silkworms, ants and scorpions! He warned us, he is a no taboo man.

He wakes up at 5 am (no wonder he was so cool when he said, “can we meet at six”) returns after his run by 8 am. He

sleeps by 11 pm. In between he looks after the essential in life; his work.

Road runner he may be and it may be his biggest pre-occupation, but that is still his passion. A passion converted into business. *Pinkathon*. Where women who have never run in their lives are encouraged to run. Coaxed, cajoled, inspired to run. To discover for themselves the freedom it offers; to first make time for themselves and then overcome the inhibition to go out there and just run, or even walk, in public gaze.

“Yeah it’s amazing, the response to *Pinkathon*. I am happy India is going pink, under my banner of *United Sisters Foundation*. These runs are held in eight cities already with four more being added this year. Bombay, Delhi, Gauhati, Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Madras, Hyderabad, Poona, Nagpur, Goa, Visakhapatnam, Raipur and Vijaynagar. About 10,000 women across all age groups and different backgrounds participate in *Pinkathon*. Which is a 2, 3, 5 and 10 km event. The idea is to get them out, make them realise that they have to do things for themselves. Life is not just about being a daughter, wife, mother all your life. You are a woman first. And if you don’t feel confident and empowered how can you be the superwoman in society your family expects you to be. Yes, family matters, but you first!”

Remember what they tell you in an airplane before takeoff. In an emergency should the oxygen masks fall, you fix yours first before fixing that of the child’s next to you. *Très* simple. I can see his point. Children emulate their parents, particularly moms. So, by example you can set their life’s tone, be it food or fitness. If you exercise, eat right, they do the same, they inculcate the habit, you become their role model. “And who knows, this little walk may lead to cycling, trekking, swimming – whatever, but the seed of the exhilarating feeling that exercising promotes is sown,” says Milind pretty excited at the thought of it all.

And I love the tag lines of *Pinkathon*; ‘The cause is you’, and ‘You matter most’.



“Always walk up steps, even if you stay on the 21st floor,” says Milind

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The ‘Iron Man’ Made Of Steel

Milind Soman Lives to Run

