

Movember 2021: A Retrospect

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Abstract This article provides an insight into the author's thoughts and reflections on Movember 2021, his motivations, as well as his experience from participating.

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Introduction

The recently concluded Movember 2021 [1] campaign was the second edition of which I had participated, the first being the 2020 edition which was conducted in the midst of the second national lockdown in the UK.

With the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, one of the biggest take-away I got was a better appreciation on the topic of mental health well-being, how do we identify the signs of such, and how to we cope with it. To be honest, the topic of mental health wellness was not something that I was very familiar with initially as it was not really emphasised much whence I came. On the contrary, it was through experiencing the national lockdown that provided us the opportunity to stop with what we are doing and listen to first-hand accounts from those who have been or are going through it. Truth be told, I have really learnt a lot on this subject from these personal anecdotes.

Motivation

Listening to the struggles they faced and the subsequent impact on their health, both physically and mentally, made me think back on a significant phase of my life which happened nearly a decade ago. It was the time when I was on and about with my National Service in the military, which all able-bodied male citizens of Singapore have to undergo when they come of age. Now, before going any further, I would like to state that I am fully supportive and am proud to have served in the Singapore Armed Forces, just like the many who have done so before me. However, despite the generally positive experience I had, I would like to highlight one specific period which is of significance to the topic we are on.

It was the Basic Military Training phase, where the new recruits are being taught the basic soldiering fundamentals and whipped into shape. For most of us, it was a huge transition to the civilian life which we were so used to, to a highly regimental one. I myself included. Not much fond memories were made from there, especially the fact that the environment was nothing short of harsh, which is understandable as it is the Army we are talking about. What I do remember was how all of a sudden, I would lose all concentration and become withdrawn from what is going on around me. It was as if my mind became detached from my body and I lost all awareness of reality even though my body is operating normally and still conscious. And this was just the start. Subsequently, significant degrees of anxiety would kick in randomly and the feeling of paranoia would occasionally overwhelm me. There were times I felt "suffocated" and there was no one who could seemingly relate to my problems given that everyone else seemed to have coped better than I did. Naturally, my combat and physical performance declined which added to my existing levels of stress. All those while, I thought what I had gone through was part and parcel of the "transition"

to the military life and that things will get better as they fall into place with time which prevented me from seeking necessary help. But it didn't, and to make matters worse, there were fellow recruits hurling not so pleasant remarks at me occasionally for my out of normal behaviour and poor performance. I had enough, tired, fearful for myself, and felt like ending it there.

Fast forward back to the present, 10 years was how long it took for me to realise that what I had experienced back there were a subset of a long list of mental health issues. If what I just shared may sound concerning, the reality is that we are just barely scratching the surface compared to what some of us in the community are going through themselves. This motivated us to "take up arms" (i.e. in the form of our running shoes) and answer the call to participate in the Movember campaign to raise the awareness of the concept and importance of mental health well-being among Men or Mo-bros. This will be done through fund-raising as well as undertaking a personal challenge of running at least 200km within the month of November. Figure 1 presents my Movember profile and the cause I was running for.

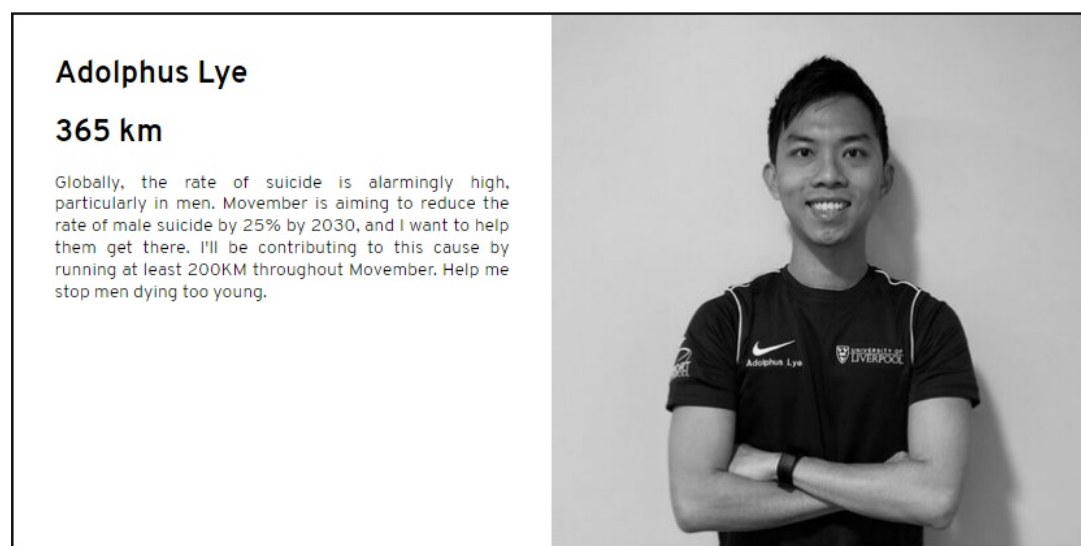


Figure 1. My Movember 2021 profile outlining the cause that I am supporting during the campaign as well as the total distance I ran within the month of November.

Results

Throughout the campaign, we tried to push ourselves to be as consistent in our runs as possible. To ensure that our performance standards were not compromised during official Cross Country team training days, the off-training runs will be done at relatively comfortable and easy pace to minimise the risk of injury and other issues associated with over-training. Table 1 presents the data of the distance covered and the pace for the respective days in the month of November 2021. Figure 2 illustrates the data of the distance covered vs days in the form of a bar chart, while Figure 3 illustrates the data of the cumulative distance covered vs days in the form of a graphical plot.

From the data presented, of the 30 days in the month, 5 of which are those where no run was done. A personal record of lowest number of days without running within a month. In addition, it is also observed in the latter half of the month, 20 consecutive days of running was conducted between the 11th and the 30th day of November, the longest running streak I had ever executed. Furthermore, of the 25 days where a run was done, 23 of which involved distances above 10km, 11 of which involved distances above 16km (i.e. 10 miles), and 3 of which involved distances above 20km. To top it off, a personal record of longest distance covered was made on the 27th day when we managed to run a total distance of 24.60km within a single session. In total, 365.12km was covered.

Table 1. Distance covered and the pace for the corresponding days of November 2021. The days marked in red denote the official training days.

Day	Distance [km]	Pace [mm : ss/km]	Day	Distance [km]	Pace [mm : ss/km]	Day	Distance [km]	Pace [mm : ss/km]
1	0.00	—	11	11.11	5 : 30	21	20.55	5 : 39
2	11.10	5 : 23	12	6.49	5 : 28	22	16.70	5 : 42
3	0.00	—	13	4.86	5 : 29	23	16.03	5 : 57
4	12.36	5 : 34	14	11.56	5 : 18	24	17.11	5 : 55
5	0.00	—	15	13.41	5 : 23	25	16.03	5 : 47
6	16.11	5 : 29	16	15.13	5 : 32	26	16.72	5 : 36
7	0.00	—	17	13.41	5 : 30	27	24.60	5 : 29
8	6.11	5 : 08	18	18.33	5 : 55	28	12.78	5 : 56
9	14.15	5 : 38	19	16.42	5 : 29	29	17.01	5 : 45
10	0.00	—	20	22.01	5 : 51	30	15.03	5 : 56

Source: Strava - <https://www.strava.com/>

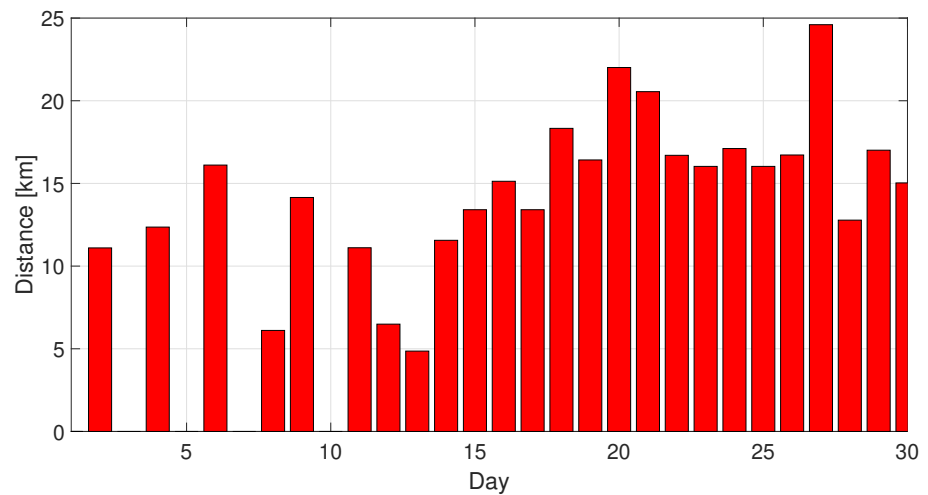


Figure 2. Bar chart representation of the numerical data of distance vs days from Table 1.

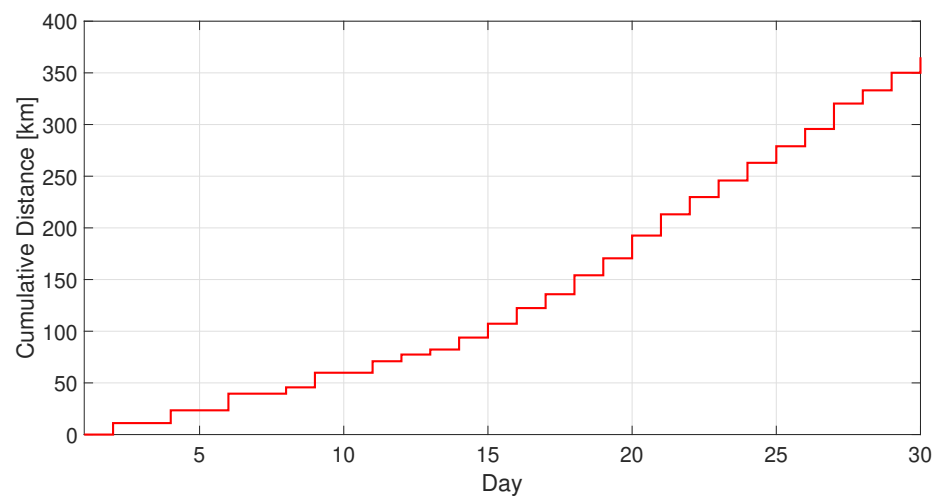


Figure 3. Graphical representation of the cumulative distance vs days.

Reflection

The personal performances presented in the "Results" section far exceeded the initial plans and expectations we have set for ourselves prior to the start of the campaign. In fact, we have tripled the total mileage achieved in Movember 2020 where a total distance of 121.34km was covered and we could not have been anymore prouder of that. To some, this may not be anything of a huge achievement. But to me, it means as much as the World.

It was far from easy achieving what was presented here. On some days, there was barely any motivation to run in part due to the poor weather conditions, such as the strong winds and snow, with no one else to accompany. On other days, the physical fatigue can be very overwhelming, especially from the long nights due to PhD work which resulted in very little rest. These, coupled with the growing fatigue level and pain in my legs due to the increased load, had made it very tempting on more than one occasions to just stop and call it quits, especially after meeting the aforementioned initial target distance.

But what kept us going were the following: 1) The fellow Movember participants from the Liverpool Athletics and Cross Country Team [2] who are brilliant runners themselves and are sparing no effort for this campaign. This helped to push me, enabling me to soldier on; 2) The personal desire and passion to out-perform myself and break the psychological barriers that have plague me in my growth as a Cross-country runner; 3) To prove to myself that I am better and stronger than I was 10 years ago both physically and mentally; and 4) The reminder that the pain that I am experiencing from undertaking this challenge is only a small fraction compared to those who are going through severe mental health issues and personal challenges. As such, this is no longer just for myself, but mainly for them.

Conclusion

On this, I wish to express my immense gratitude and thanks to those who have supported and encouraged me through the course of this campaign as well as those who have donated to this cause. No words can describe qualitatively how I feel on this. I would also like to make special mention of my team-mates who texted and check-in on me when I was expressing my immense stress due to my crazy workload which happened to coincide with the Movember period. Such gestures are very much appreciated beyond any quantity expressed by any physical metric. Furthermore, I would also like to thank those who showed concern over my sudden increase in running load which have caused some worries due to the increased risk of injury that I was putting myself at. Rest assured that ample rest was observed upon the start of December to allow for my legs to recover and reduce the strain on the muscles which have worked really hard.

Although Movember 2021 has concluded at the time of writing, it does not mark the end of mental health awareness. Let us continue to check-in on one another. Even a simple question such as "Are you OK?" goes a long way in making a difference in someone else's life. Mental health problems may not be as visible as it should be, but it is as real as it can ever be. As my mileage suggests, everyday, 365 days a year, someone is going through hard-times and it could be a family member or your close friend. On this note, if you are in a place where you need help, do get it and ask for it by reaching out to somebody. The last thing we want is ignorance to the signs and symptoms of mental health issues, like myself a decade ago.

Note: The article as well as the MATLAB codes to reproduce the figures presented here are accessible on GitHub: <https://github.com/Adolphus8/Movember.git>

References

- [1] "Movember." <https://uk.movember.com/>. Main website.
- [2] Sport-Liverpool, "University of Liverpool Athletics and Cross Country Club." <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/sports/sports-clubs/student-sports/athletics/>. Main website.