

Ranatunga Karunananda
Athlete No. 67 of men's 10,000 meters Race,
1964 Olympics, Japan¹

A story of determination, grit and love for one's country

He crossed the finish line in last place — an entire lap behind — his body wracked with pain. Yet instead of silence or ridicule, 70,000 people rose to their feet. That applause has echoed for more than half a century.

October 14, 1964. Tokyo's National Stadium. The men's 10,000 meters race at the Olympic Games. Seventy thousand spectators filled the stands.

Among the runners stood Ranatunge Karunananda, representing Ceylon — today known as Sri Lanka. His bib number was 67.

The starting gun fired. Thirty-eight athletes surged forward. The race was brutal: 25 laps around the track. One by one, runners collapsed or withdrew. Nine never finished. When the presumed final runner crossed the line, spectators began to leave. The competition, everyone assumed, was over.

But number 67 was still running. A full lap behind the field. One hand pressed against his side. His face tight with pain.

The crowd noticed. At first, there were jeers. Then boos. Why continue? The outcome was settled. This was uncomfortable to watch. Yet Karunananda did not stop. Step after step, he pushed on. And slowly, the mood shifted.

The mocking fell quiet. Applause began — first scattered, then growing. Soon the entire stadium stood as one. Seventy thousand

Source : Internet

people cheered for a man finishing last. Many were crying. They shouted as though he were their own athlete. As if he were winning gold instead of finishing far behind everyone else. When he finally crossed the line, the roar was overwhelming.

Later, journalists asked him why he hadn't quit. His reply was simple: *"I have a small daughter at home. One day, when she grows up, I want to tell her that her father went to the Tokyo Olympics — and that he finished the race, even though he lost."*

What they didn't know was that Karunananda had been sick for a week before the event. He was never fit to compete. But Ceylon was poor. Sending athletes to the Olympics demanded sacrifice. He refused to let that effort be wasted. He had been given one chance to represent his country — and he intended to see it through.

Japan was deeply moved. His story entered elementary school textbooks under the title "Uniform Number 67." Millions of children learned how a runner, mocked at first, kept going in agony — and how the boos turned into cheers. The lesson appeared in textbooks throughout the 1970s and, decades later, in English editions for junior high students. For 57 years, Japanese media retold his story ahead of every Summer Olympics.

But there was a quiet tragedy. Ten years after Tokyo, Karunananda drowned in an accident. He was just 38. His daughter grew up knowing her father was a hero — but never knowing him.

Then, more than half a century after that race, the story came full circle.

In 2016, a young woman from Sri Lanka arrived in Japan to study disaster prevention. Her name was Oshadi Nuwanthika Halpe.

She was Karunananda's granddaughter — the child of that “little daughter” he had spoken of.

To her astonishment, she discovered that her grandfather was still remembered across Japan.

“It feels like my grandfather is still alive here,” she said.

Graduate school was hard. The language was difficult. After finishing in 2018, she felt uncertain and considered returning home.

Then a friend sent her a video.

She watched number 67 struggle around the track. Watched the crowd transform. Watched him finish.

And she remembered the words her mother said her grandfather lived by:

“You must finish what you start.”

Oshadi stayed.

She studied care work for two more years and, in 2020, became a caregiver at an elderly facility in Gunma Prefecture. She married a Japanese man. She built a life in the country that had honored her grandfather.

Her choice of work was personal — her own grandmother in Sri Lanka was bedridden. Oshadi now dreams of mastering nursing skills in Japan and one day bringing them back to her homeland, where long-term care is still scarce.

“I don't know how long it will take,” she says, “but I want to return and give back. I think that's my grandfather teaching me how.”

When the Tokyo Olympics returned in 2021, Oshadi watched the men's 10,000 meters on television. Because of the pandemic, she couldn't visit the stadium herself.

“One day,” she says, “*I want to stand where my grandfather ran. My mother wants to see it too — at least once.*”

Think about that day in 1964.

A sick runner from a poor country finished last before 70,000 people.

He could have stopped. No one would have blamed him. Others already had.

But he kept going — for his country, for his daughter, for the promise of finishing what he began.

And the crowd saw something greater than victory.

They saw perseverance. Dignity. The true spirit of the Olympics.

They cheered him like a champion — because in that moment, he was one. His story crossed generations. And decades later, a granddaughter who never met him faced her own moment of doubt — and found her answer in his footsteps.

Ranatunge Karunananda finished last.

But some finishes last forever.

Because sometimes, the people we remember most aren't the ones who win — they're the ones who refuse to stop.

YouTube: [The Runner Who Never Gave Up – The Story of Ranatunge Karunananda \(1964 Tokyo Olympics\)](#)

