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Lessons to learn from Shay's sudden death

Basic Tests Should Be Made Mandatory For Athletes To Avoid Such Incidents In Future

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The closely knit long distance running community has been shocked by the sudden death of 28-year-old Ryan Shay while competing in the US Olympic men's marathon selection race a week ago. What's really shocking is that this wasn't your next door middle-aged ad-hoc runner out for a photo-op or simple fun but an elite world class long distance runner, strongly tipped to be on the US marathon team for the Beijing Olympics.

Ryan Shay had been running since the age of 14 years and was the 2003 US marathon and half marathon champion. Shay collapsed 5.5 miles into the race and was brought dead to a city hospital. His death was

sudden in perfect running conditions, before dehydration or overhydration could have set in.

His father Joe Shay has stated that Ryan had an enlarged heart since he was 14 and this had been explained by his intense training schedule. Ryan, in fact, had often been seen training in sub zero temperatures and was well known for his tremendous dedication to distance running. He was in peak physical condition in the prime of his youth when death struck him.

The commonest cause of sudden death in sportspersons is an enlarged heart—technically called 'hypertrophic cardiomyopathy'—involving artery variations, dilated right heart and infection of the heart muscle. The initial au-



HEALTH MATTERS: Periodic healths check-ups might have helped marathon runner Ryan Shay (in the pix) avoid his untimely end

topsy on Shay has turned out to be inconclusive and now we have to wait for the results of microscopic study of his heart muscle tissue samples. The

toxicology report is also awaited to rule out the use of performance enhancing drugs.

Still, hypertrophic cardiomyopathy becomes a dis-

tinct possibility because it's the commonest cause of sudden deaths in young athletes world over. Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy is not a rare disease and can be easily diagnosed by an electrocardiogram and two dimensional echocardiogram. It is a genetic disease and runs in families. The disease can be completely asymptomatic and can present itself devastatingly for the first time as sudden collapse and death especially in teenagers and young adults.

Surprisingly, Shay had been cleared to participate as recently as last year by a medical team. In fact, just two days before last Saturday's race Shay had warmed up with his friend and eventual winner of the race, Ryan Hall, with absolutely no trace of any discomfort.

So, how would he, or for that matter any runner, know if sudden death awaits him? There's no other way but by periodic check ups. This tragic death of a young man in his prime should be a trigger to make us ensure that all sport federations in India make it mandatory for all sportsmen to be checked out for hypertrophic cardiomyopathy by a clinical examination, ECG and echocardiography.

Being an active runner myself and an avid watcher of all sports, I do not wish to discourage millions of sportspersons in our country from pursuing physical activity but prudence and common sense demands that basic tests are carried out to prevent such a tragic and bewildering end.