

by Patty Lee Parmalee

More so than for able-bodied runners, running and especially racing can have a powerful effect on the lives of the disabled. It is a rare handicap that does not affect many aspects of a disabled person's life, from job, economic status, and social life to a whole complex of feelings of inadequacy or dependency. For those who live on disability or welfare payments and need physical and economic help from their family as well, it is often hard to have or develop a sense of self-worth.

### Pride Through Running

John Paul ("J.P.") Cruz, the cheerful 22-year-old one-legged runner who was born a thalidomide baby, has run nine races so far on his crutches, from five miles to a half-marathon. He is now training for the New York City Marathon. John badly wants to run long distances because he believes it will give him and his family in New York and Puerto Rico pride in his ability to accomplish something.

John is a member of the Achilles Track Club, an official team of physically handicapped runners sponsored by the New York Road Runners Club (NYRRC). In the five months since he started running, J.P. has progressed so much running on crutches that he is now helping with the beginner section of NYRRC classes for able-bodied runners. J.P., who believes that running has changed his outlook on life, does some volunteer work for Road Runners races and has become a familiar sight to Central Park competitors. After a race many runners report that seeing him and other Achilles runners on foot and in wheelchairs gave them a special lift during the race.

Not only is the Club doing something important for people less fortunate than most runners, but Achilles members also are doing something important for other runners. Whether



Achilles runner J. P. Cruz has completed nine races and is training for the New York City Marathon.

you zoom by them at the front of the pack or fall in at their speed and hear the onlookers cheering for them, seeing disabled runners in a race does something to make you feel really good about your sport. On the simplest level you think, "If they can run this race I can certainly put out a little more effort." On a deeper level you are moved, perhaps to tears, by the indomitability of the human spirit.

### Self-Selected Group

Of course, just to have considered running these disabled people are already a self-selected group. They have worked past most of their feelings of helplessness and know they want to improve their physical and mental well-being. When asked whether they were depressed by their handicap, Achilles members respond with "Not really," or "Only for a little while."

Most hold regular jobs. Some were athletes before the accident or opera-

runners are also invited, and deaf runners may join if their deafness impairs their physical activity.

### New Lease on Life

Roughly half the members are ambulatory and half are in wheelchairs. Even within those categories, the different kinds of disabilities make it impossible to score runners against each other in a race, so each person is encouraged to compete only against his or her own previous time, or to ignore

# ACHILLES

## A TEAM FOR DISABLED RUNNERS

tion that disabled them. Ben Agosto, for instance, was a track cyclist and had a black belt in karate when he was paralyzed last year by a knife-stab in the back during a gang fight that erupted around him. Paula Schillo, who was paralyzed on her left side during a brain operation to treat epilepsy, says it didn't take her long to figure out that "What matters is what you do with what you have." And Linda Down, who has cerebral palsy, is so far from thinking of herself as a victim that she talks about running so she can be a model for other disabled people and for women in general.

An enormous amount of work and courage has enabled Linda to become an effective model indeed. After finishing the 1982 New York City Marathon in 11 hours, she was invited to the White House to share the President's congratulations with Alberto Salazar and Gretę Waitz. Later, when she participated in the United Cerebral Palsy Telethon, Howard Cosell called her the "athlete of the century." She has also been invited to give speeches to disabled and women's service groups around the country. But she still comes faithfully to Wednesday night Achilles Club workouts. When she does a marathon again she will do it in much better time, because now she has coaching and people to run with; the first time, her training and the race were done all alone.

For every disabled person who has found the courage and optimism to engage in sports and self-improvement, though, there are many more who remain depressed, feeling useless without a job or a skill, whose physical inactivity contributes to their unhappiness and depression. The Achilles Track Club hopes to reach many of these people as well, by publicizing its activities to hospitals, organizations for the disabled, doctors, and the public at large.

There is room not just for veteran competitors, but also for beginners and the severely out-of-shape; people work out at many different speeds. A dialysis patient recently joined who, although he needs exercise to oxygenate his blood, must also be careful not to overexert. Coaches prescribed alternating slow jogging and walking for him, with periodic heart-rate checks. Another new member is recovering from a stroke that left him weak and spastic on one side. Blind

competition and just enjoy the excitement of being part of the sport. Members are encouraged to set goals to improve their own time and distance, for fitness and fellowship.

To finish a race at all is a great accomplishment if you have to hop-skip on an artificial leg, or if you have cerebral palsy and have to drag your feet between your crutches, or if you are in a wheelchair and all the sports you have participated in so far have been with other people in wheelchairs. Then to do a better time in your next race, so you know your physical condition is improving after what might be years or a lifetime of forced inactivity, gives a whole new lease on life.

Wheelchair racing has already achieved popularity at selected road races around the country, and the Achilles Club boasts two members who have been pioneers in the field, Natalie Bacon and Marty Ball. They help with coaching and advice on equipment. It is an exciting experience for someone who has always sat in a heavy, upright wheelchair to get into a lighter weight racing chair and run in a race—a little like trying a sports car if you're used to driving a farm truck. Of course racing chairs are expensive, and most Achilles members cannot afford to buy their own. Procuring equipment continues to be a financial problem for the Club and its members.

### Trial and Success

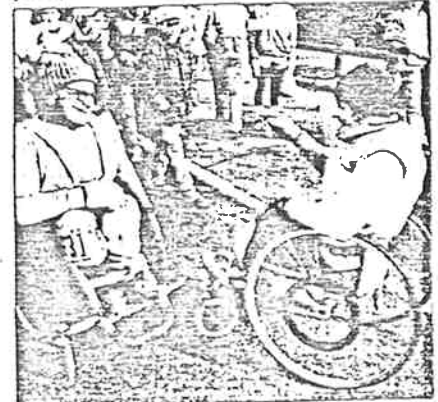
Coordinating starting times and traffic control during races remains an unsettled issue. Wheelchair runners (who can be very fast or fairly slow, depending on their experience, disability, and equipment) prefer to run with the crowd. The NYRRC is in the process of devising guidelines for safety, especially on downhills. Crutch and artificial-leg runners, and those with other ambulatory disabilities, sometimes start out ahead of the pack so they will finish with other runners, rather than run alone the whole race and miss out on the camaraderie. Or they may start with a men's race if a women's race is starting separately later.

Everything about the Achilles Club is new and experimental, and these procedures are being developed through trial and error (or, more often, trial and success) to benefit regular and

disabled runners alike. An overwhelming number of regular runners have shown a wonderfully positive response to having the disabled runners in their midst.

Experimentation continues with warm-up and cool-down exercises. Coaches try to make them specific to the disabilities. That involves consultation with physical therapists and learning from the members themselves. Jim Beckford, an assistant coach who has worked with wheelchair athletes for 10 years (including coaching the international wheelchair table tennis team in 1980 and 1982), instructs members in relaxation exercises for the arms. Dick Trautman shares his experiences with preventing chafing of artificial legs. And I contribute concepts from tai chi, yoga, and regular running classes I teach for the NYRRC.

As a person whose life is tied up in the use of my body and who loves feeling healthy, I have always had a phobia about any kind of bodily handicap. Though I have been a teacher for 18 years, I now can express the cliché that



Techniques and equipment for wheelchair racing have improved during recent years.

"I have learned more from my students than they from me" with real meaning.

In working with Achilles Club members, I gradually have learned that any kind of disaster can be overcome, or, with the right attitude, turned to advantage. Hearing member after member tell me they were not depressed by their fate, how much they enjoy life, and how much the activities they are able to do mean to them has helped me realize that I too would probably have the energy and optimism to carry on, stay healthy, and deepen my sense of worth in spite of physical, financial, or personal disaster.

Something of that feeling rubs off on other runners who associate with the Achilles Track Club members, so the experiment must be deemed a success from everyone's point of view. NYRRC has provided a wonderful free service to disabled runners, but they in turn are giving something very valuable back.

As I write this I'm listening to John Lennon sing, "One thing you can't hide is when you're crippled inside." Smiles on the faces of Achilles runners as they become more and more healthy inside and out is infectious, and proof that another thing you can't hide is when you're whole inside.

Patty Lee Parmalee is a national class distance runner in the masters category, winner of the age 40 to 49 division of the 1982 Leggs Mini Marathon, and coordinator and coach for the Achilles Track Club.