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Disabled Athletes Determined to Raise the Bar

Many who favor mainstreaming just want access to what the average competitor—not Olympian—has.

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TIMES STAFF WRITER

The treadmill was boring, even for a beginner's 15-minute workout, and Ivonne Mosquera was shy about having to ask friends to go running with her. So six months ago, on a blustery, cold day, the 24-year-old joined a running group in New York City and jogged outside for the first time.

At first, Mosquera, who has been completely blind since she was 13 months old, was afraid to head out without her cane to feel out curbs and bumps; she still remembers what it felt like to run smack into walls in high school gym classes. Now, at a brisk pace of 8.5 minutes per

mile, she's in training for a 10K race in a field of able-bodied and disabled runners. (She runs side-by-side with a guide who describes the course.)

Runners such as Mosquera say they relate more to the average able-bodied runner than to the elite athletes with disabilities who have recently made headlines, including Maria Runyan, the first legally blind track athlete to make a U.S. Olympic team.

All her life, Mosquera has been lithe and fit, a swimmer, skier and dancer. She doesn't want to be confined to easy Braille trails in parks or competitive events for the blind. What she wants is to be able to run outside with everyone else, to have the freedom of movement that most people

take for granted.

"The whole physics about it, the aerodynamics of your body, is completely different [outside]," she says. Not that she wants to break into elite mainstream circles the way Runyan did.

"I don't see it as such an inspirational thing for me," Mosquera said of Runyan's achievement. "It's great—here's someone who's doing some groundbreaking and opening the door for other athletes, but it's not like I strive to run in Maria Runyan's footsteps. These Olympic athletes are exactly that—they're in an elite class. You never think of the average American making it to that point."

These days, groups such as Achilles Track Club, the international nonprofit

group that Mosquera joined, are encouraging their disabled members—whenever possible—to participate in the type of "mainstream" or "integrated" outdoors events that any athletic amateur might consider. The battleground, they say, is in their own communities, not the Olympics or pro sports. "All the accessibility warriors know what we're really fighting for is just to be folded into the system," said Phyllis Cangemi, founder of Whole Access, a San Francisco Bay Area disabilities rights group.

The past few weeks have been full of news featuring groundbreaking disabled athletes. On May 29, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of Casey Martin, the

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Associated Press

Maria Runyan was the first legally blind athlete to make a U.S. Olympic team.



Associated Press

Erik Welthenmayer, 32, holds a rope on his climb up Mt. Everest, becoming the first blind man to reach the summit, on May 24.

Compete: Disabled Look to Mainstream

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29-year-old disabled golfer who filed suit to force the PGA Tour Inc. to waive its walking rule and let him ride a cart between the holes. (The decision also means that disabled athletes are entitled to "reasonable modifications" in some competition rules, as long as they would not have an unfair advantage or the competition would not be fundamentally altered.) On May 24, Erik Welthenmayer, 32, became the first blind climber to reach the summit of Mt. Everest, at 29,035 feet.

And though advocates for the disabled find inspiration in these developments, they've kept their focus on the ordinary—on helping everyday athletes enter the mainstream of track clubs and hiking groups—even as they describe their admiration for extraordinary achievements.

Barbara Pierce, director of public education for the National Federation of the Blind in Baltimore, which sponsored Welthenmayer's \$250,000 Everest expedition, said she doesn't regard his trip as a way to encourage other disabled people to climb the world's highest mountain. Instead, said Pierce, "Erik is a spectacular newsworthy demonstration of the Everest that blind people climb every day of our lives." Just crossing the street alone can be an unfathomable challenge, she says, when people first lose their sight.

Welthenmayer is an exceptional athlete, a rock and ice climber who skydives and scuba dives, Pierce emphasized. She adds that the climber, who lost his sight at age 13, pulled his own weight as part of the 19-member team that included able-bodied and disabled members, helping to set up camp and carry loads on Mt. Everest. He made his way up the mountain by following team members who jingled a bell from an ice ax or ski pole and called out directions.

"What we strive to do in the federation," Pierce said, "is to establish models in which everybody can work together toward interdependence, where blind people are seen as contributing members of an integrated team or community and are allowed to give and expected to give."

The primary goal of the climb, according to the federation's mission statement, was "not to put a blind climber on the summit at any cost, but to place a true team of climbers, one of whom happens to be blind, on top of the world."

The team reflected "the mainstreaming effect that is reaching into extreme sports," Pierce said. But "Erik is not going to start an avalanche. If there's a parade, it was already going on."

Last year, for instance, 222 Achilles athletes assisted by 500 volunteer guides, participated in the New York City Marathon's main field. (The wheelchair division included 103 other Achilles members.)

In this year's Los Angeles Marathon, 25 Achilles members participated in the main or wheelchair divisions, said Jon Ross, the group's local coordinator for 13 years. Group members, who run about one local mainstream race a month and half-every Sunday morning, are so accepted that the media no longer writes about them. "They're like, 'Well, when [members] start

ascending Everest without oxygen, let us know,'" Ross said. "In a way, that's great. It's sort of proving that people with disabilities are already in the mainstream."

Impact of Federal Law

Mainstreaming efforts have intensified in the past 15 years or so, partly because of the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act in 1990. Under the law, it is illegal to discriminate against people with physical or mental disabilities in "places of public accommodations," such as restaurants, offices and sports stadiums. The ADA doesn't specifically address athletes. But some see the spirit of the law extending to sports, disability rights advocates said.

Psychological barriers have fallen, too, as athletes continue to expand the notion of what's possible. Diana Golden, who lost a leg to cancer at 12, became the first disabled skier to compete regularly in non-disabled events. In 1986, the U.S. Olympic Committee named her Female Skier of the Year. At 29, mountaineer Mark Wellman became the first paraplegic to ascend Yosemite's famously brutal El Capitan in July 1989, using only his arms to pull himself up the 3,200-foot sheer granite face. "The challenges have become bigger and bigger, and the adventures bolder and bolder," said Doug Pringle, executive director of Disabled Sports USA-Far West in Citrus Heights, Calif.

Still, the disabled community usually is realistic about where to draw the line, said Pringle, an amputee who skis on one leg. "The ongoing battle is to be included in the mainstream as much as possible in every kind of sport and recreation pursuit," he said.

"However, we do have to recognize there are differences in how people are able to function. It may be biomechanically impossible for a disabled person to perform the same kind of movement patterns in a sport... I don't think it's realistic to say a quadriplegic in a motorized wheelchair should be able to play on a football team."

The way Pringle sees it, mainstreaming doesn't mean that a disabled person must ski on the same team as an able-bodied skier. The idea, he said, is that everyone should be on the same slope, that the disabled skier should not be relegated to specially designated areas. Using special equipment, people with disabilities should be able to join their able-bodied friends and family members on rivers and trails.

Tackling a Tough Trail

Last August, in New Hampshire, a group of 22 hikers, including three in wheelchairs and two on crutches, fought to make that point on a rough, 4.6-mile trail in the White Mountains. The hike was organized by the University of New Hampshire's Northeast Passage group, which provides sports and recreational opportunities for individuals with physical

disabilities. Organizers spent nearly a year planning the trip to a 30-bed hut that had been rebuilt by the Appalachian Mountain Club to comply with federal accessibility rules for new buildings.

What a waste, critics charged, to pay an extra \$30,000 to \$50,000 for modifications including a wheelchair ramp, wider doorways and grab bars in bigger toilet stalls. Critics pointed to the renovations as an example of the Americans With Disabilities Act gone awry, saying no disabled person would ever make it up the trail. Northeast Passage members proved them wrong.

Using ropes, pulleys and special equipment, the team reached the hut in about 12 hours. (An average able-bodied hiker could make the hike in about four to five hours.) "We didn't take elite athletes," said Jill Gravinik, director of Northeast Passage. "We took people who absolutely love to be in the woods, people who, before their accidents, that's where they lived. That was their church. . . . [The team] wasn't an us-versus-them. It was all about a group of people who want to be in the woods."

Northeast Passage is working on an hourlong video documentary on how the group pulled off the hike, covering topics from equipment to politics, Gravinik said. Organizers, who attracted national news coverage, also have spoken at conferences, hoping to inspire other integrated hiking teams to take on similar challenges.

Volunteers for Northeast Passage wanted to show that they could take on a terrain thought to be impossible for them. The push for other groups, such as the nonprofit Whole Access in Northern California, is to make tough trails more accessible. That doesn't mean paved trails, said Gangemi, the group's founder who has Hodgkin's disease and uses a four-wheeled scooter. Members are proposing simple modifications, such as covering up exposed tree roots and removing wooden steps.

With the input of Gangemi and others, the California State Parks' North Coast Redwood District is reevaluating its trails for accessibility, said Don Beers, a district supervisor. Last June, the district reopened two trails at Prairie Creek Redwoods Park with some of the suggested modifications, such as minor path adjustments, to make the route less steep. The two trails form a 3.5-mile loop through old-growth redwoods. District officials hope to add 35 miles of such modified trails in the next five years, Beers said.

In New York, Achilles, which has primarily focused on running events, is turning its attention to other challenges. In August, a team of seven Achilles athletes, including Mosquera, will climb Mt. Kilimanjaro with 18 guides.

Kilimanjaro, at 19,310 feet, is Africa's highest mountain. The trip is difficult but doesn't require technical gear such as climbing ropes or crampons. "Here we are, average people, average Americans, and we're going to get in shape for this," said Mosquera, who has little hiking experience. "And, if it's the last thing I do, I'm going to make it to the top."