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NYC Marathon '83

A Retrospective: Linda Down Talks About the 1982 NYC Marathon

Linda Down finished the 1982 New York City Marathon, on crutches, in a little more than 11 hours and was the subject of the January 1983 "RW Exclusive."

"Why did you do it?"

It's the question that's been asked most frequently since I completed the 1982 New York City Marathon.

When the idea first entered my head, I saw the run as a challenge, a way to test my own limits. I had assumed that because I had cerebral palsy and used crutches, I couldn't run. The two seemed diametrically opposed. Were they? I saw the marathon as an adventure. It was an opportunity to explore, in a very visceral way, a city I loved, and a chance to be part of something international.

As my training progressed, I began to see the run as something that might also foster hope and help people feel that if this was possible for me, there were possibilities in their own lives left untapped.

That message was communicated in a way I never imagined. After the marathon, amid the barrage of publicity that followed—including the ceremonies at the White House—I was deemed to be both a heroine and an athlete. I was uncomfortable with both titles, and I felt somehow that they were undeserved. In my mind, I think, the two terms were synonymous with perfection. A hero/heroine was someone who was fearless, and I knew how fearful I'd been before the marathon and how awesome it felt at times. An athlete was someone with a perfect body, and mine was far less than perfect.

As a result of the marathon, I received a number of invitations. One was to become one of the charter members of a track club for disabled people sponsored by the New York City Road Runners Club. I loved the idea and joined. It was later christened the Achilles Track Club and now boasts about 25 members. Along with the camaraderie and support that the club has afforded me, it has also given me a chance to develop as an athlete. I have run a number of races with the club since the marathon. When I ran the L'eggs Mini Marathon in May, I cut my previous time for this particular race by 30 minutes. On Father's Day, I had one of my biggest thrills when I ran a four-miler and was seconds away from breaking a 15-minute mile—five minutes faster than my marathon pace. As a result of these experiences, and because of my continued commitment to running, I now feel I can lay claim to the title of athlete.

After the marathon, I was also invited to do some public speaking around the

country and to appear on a number of radio and television shows, predominantly in support of United Cerebral Palsy. I have immensely enjoyed all of these activities—particularly the public speaking. It has given me a chance to travel and utilize my skills as both a writer and a social worker. For example, in March I spoke at the Minnesota Conference for Exceptional Children on "The Image of the Disabled in Today's Society."

In the course of my travels, I've seen that my marathon run has had an impact. After one speech, a young man approached me and told me that he was asthmatic and had always wanted to run, but thought he couldn't do it. After seeing me run, he decided that he would give it a try. A woman approached me after another speech and told me that after she saw me run, she was inspired to tackle a weight problem that she was struggling with. She lost 80 pounds. A mother told me that she had a 3-year-old son with cerebral palsy, and after she saw me run she had hope that he would be able to walk.

I have also received many personal letters from people around the country. All of them have been special, but I have been particularly touched by the letters I've received from children. A group of fifth-graders in Queens wrote to me inviting me to come to their class. One girl wrote: "Our class is on the fourth floor, but I think you can make it up the stairs. You ran 26.2 miles!" Another group of children from a residential school for the disabled wrote to me asking me to visit them. I could see by reading the letters that they were written with much labor and much love. I made both trips. These have been some of the special moments since the marathon, moments I will always remember.

"Would you do it again?" That's been the next most frequently asked question. At this writing, I have ambivalent feelings about running the New York City Marathon again. Part of me would love to run it to test out my newfound strength. On the other hand, I feel under a great deal of pressure because I have become so visible and would be expected to finish.

I have discovered one thing as a result of my first marathon: I think we all carry with us a disability of some kind. We may be trapped in a disabling situation or harbor disabling images or attitudes about ourselves. They may be feelings of self-doubt, worthlessness, inadequacy or despair. If by running I have helped anyone free himself or herself from a disabling situation, image or attitude, then I'm glad I did it—and yes, I would do it again. □