

## The Achilles Handicap: You Don't Have to be Disabled to Run It

by Susan Festa

Starting lines look pretty much the same. Elite runners line up first and the remaining runners fall in behind them according to their mile time. But what if the starting line were reversed? If the last were to begin first? If, for instance, an 11-minute miler or a partially sighted runner started to race before a world-class runner?

That idea will be put to the test on December 4 at the premier of The Achilles Handicap. The brainchild of Achilles Track Club president Dick Traum, the 10k race will give all runners timed early starts. A runner's handicap will be a head start measured in minutes. And the only runners who won't receive a handicap are those in wheelchairs, since their 10k times better those by even the fastest runner on foot.

The Achilles Handicap is also the first race of its kind to put disabled athletes on equal footing with other runners. "The handicap idea is really a play on words," says Traum. "Every runner is handicapped. Every runner receives a handicap. The only exceptions are the runners in wheelchairs. And they are already handicapped."

The handicaps are not determined by a runner's PR, but by how fast your age group has finished a 10k. For instance, let's say Bill Rodgers runs The Achilles Handicap. Rodgers would re-

ceive a seven-minute handicap because the best time for his age group (29:57) is approximately seven minutes slower than the best 10k time (22:58) for a male wheelchair runner. "Rodgers and every runner will finish the race as if everyone were the same age and sex," explains Traum. "We have removed any age or sex advantage from the race."

Traum began to assemble the race three years ago after seeing the movie starring Bruce Dern called *On the Edge*. The movie was a fictional account of Marin County's grueling 6.8-mile Dipsea race which takes runners up one side of 2,606-foot Mount Tamalpais and down the other side to the ocean. The Dipsea runners also receive staggered starts. Traum extended the concept to include handicapped runners.

Traum, however, faced a handicap of his own: money. For two years he searched for backing, hoping someone would sponsor the race. The New York Eye and Ear Infirmary ultimately agreed to do so. The infirmary's support will be twofold. Not only will they supply the financial backing for the race, but they are also challenging others to help. The kind of help the infirmary is hoping to attract would come from companies and doctors in the form of operations to restore the hearing and sight of some Achilles runners.

"There is one runner in particular from Trinidad and Tobago who is visually impaired," explains Traum. "His sight could be restored with the proper operation, but he doesn't have the money." If the infirmary's challenge is accepted, participating companies would finance the supplies for the operation and the doctors would perform the surgery for free.

"This is more than a road race," says Linda Down, who holds the American record (7:57:58) for completing a marathon on crutches. "It's fun for me to think of it in terms of having a chance to win, but the race will also give some Achilles runners a chance at medical treatment. Personally, I hope it becomes an annual event." Down's predicted finish at The Achilles Handicap? "I hope to run under 15 minutes a mile," she says. Her 10k personal best is 1:28.

The Achilles Handicap has also caught the attention of *Runner's World* editor Amby Burfoot, who has organized races in which both older and female runners receive head starts. "My experience has shown that the winners are usually those who have underestimated how fast they can run," says Burfoot. "The races are also a surprise. They'll open your eyes to how fabulously a 48-year-old man or a 60-year-old woman can run."

Traum also believes that the winner will not be the forecasted favorite. "There's no telling who will win. But I bet it'll be someone unexpected." No matter who the winner is, he or she will be the first to cross the finish line. No handicap changes that rule. The handicaps also won't create a situation in which all runners will cross the finish simultaneously. For the most part, the best runners will lead the field and the top finishers will be those runners who typically score high in their age groups. But along the way, it is anyone's race to win as 60-year-old runners will be racing alongside 20-year-old runners.

Traum is hoping to attract over 5,000 runners, including 200 disabled runners. He already has commitments from Achilles runners from Poland, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, Israel, the Soviet Union, Trinidad, and Tobago.

**All entrants will be equal in the Achilles Handicap.**



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