

# Leisure Sports

Newsday's recreational sports report

## Wheelchairs, Crutches, Athletes

New York's Achilles Track Club gives willing spirits a chance to compete

By Dave Rosner

**S**HE HAD triumphantly broken the finish-line tape in the New York City Marathon. She had been honored by President Reagan in a White House ceremony along with marathon champions Alberto Salazar and Grete Waitz. And yet, Linda Down still could not think of herself as an athlete. "I was suddenly labeled as an athlete and I was uncomfortable with it," she said. "When I decided to run a marathon, I wasn't thinking of changing my self-concept; I wasn't doing it because I wanted to be an athlete. I did it because I wanted to finish a marathon."

It had taken Linda Down 11 hours to finish the 26 miles and 385 yards of last October's New York Marathon on crutches. It would take her considerably longer to define herself as an athlete. Born with cerebral palsy, Down began running last year for fitness. The marathon was to be an end in itself; instead, it became a beginning. She discovered that as soon as she joined the Achilles Track Club for the disabled, "I've become a runner," she said.

"We've treated them as athletes, not as fitness objects," said coach Bob Glover. "At the beginning, the idea was just to get them out there and get them moving. We were afraid to push them and take a chance of hurting them; it was radical enough just having them out there running. Now, we give them speed workouts and hill workouts. The training is based on the same exact principles that I would use for anybody else. Now, they feel more like athletes."

Not that the transformation is simple. Even club president Dick Traum, an accomplished marathoner who began running eight years ago after losing his right leg in an accident, still considers himself more of a "fun-runner" than an athlete. He is not alone. "These people are typically very sedate," said Traum, who founded the club with Glover. "You don't know what sedate is until you're disabled. I mean, it's an imposition to go to the bathroom, let alone to go running in Central Park. This is my way of saying: You don't have to rely on others; you can do whatever the heck you want on your own."

"One of the stories I tell — which isn't true — is about the pep talk the psychologist gives you after you lose a leg. The guy said, 'You can do anything you want if you set your mind to it.' And I said, 'No, I can't.' And he said, 'Sure you can Name it.' And I said, 'Okay, I'd like to beat Frank Shorter in a marathon.' That was the most unrealistic thing I could think of. Well, in 1977, I ran the New York City Marathon in six hours and 44 minutes, and Frank Shorter was in the race and dropped out at 16 miles. So, you see, I beat Frank Shorter."

Dick Traum, 42, is an inspiration. In 1977, on the night before Terry Fox lost his right leg to cancer, he was shown a photo of Traum running his first marathon the previous fall. Fox immediately decided to run a fund-raising "Marathon



Newsday Photos/Paul J. Bereswill

Linda Down works out beneath a setting sun shimmering off Central Park Reservoir

of Hope" across his native Canada on an artificial leg, his distinctive gait becoming known as The Fox Trot. Before he died in 1981 at 22, he had raised \$24 million for cancer research. He remains an inspiration.

He certainly inspired Traum, who returned last September from Terry Fox Day, an annual series of the fun runs

throughout Canada, determined to start a handicapped running program. That evolved into the Achilles Track Club last winter.

The unique club now boasts more than two dozen members, less than one-third of whom compete in wheelchairs. All are inspirations. From Linda Down to John Paul Cruz, who was born with one leg

and recently began running on crutches. From Dick Traum to Pat Griskus, who last March ran what is believed to be the fastest marathon ever by an amputee, 4 hours and 11 minutes.

"These are the really gutsy people," said Paula Schillo, an inspiration herself. "Anybody with \$20,000 worth of equipment can build up muscles. But people who go to Central Park to run in a wheelchair when they can't even get out of the bathtub by themselves, now that's something. When I see John Paul running, I say: If J.P. can get through life — never mind running, just living — then I can do it."

So Schillo has done it. Nine years after her left side was paralyzed following brain surgery, she is a fluid runner. The improvement has been dramatic. "In coordination, balance, movement," she said. "I used running to bring myself back on my feet."

Whatever the therapeutic value to the body, it is much greater to the mind. Traum, a behavioral scientist from Manhattan, believes that if a test measuring self-perception were given to members when they join the club and again six months later, the difference would be telling.

"I have much more self-confidence now," said Down, a 26-year-old Manhattan freelance writer with a master's degree in social work from Adelphi. "To come out and run, you have to have a certain level of self-esteem to begin with, you have to feel very good about yourself; otherwise, you won't be able to get

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Dick Traum, Michelle Wolfe, 9, and Diane Korwek, 16, run in the park