



The Sports WIRE

Coler athlete runs Marathon

By SUSAN SCHNALL

On Sunday, October 28, 1984, as thousands of marathoners crossed the finish line after a grueling 26-mile run, number K-157, an official entrant in a wheelchair, passed a cheering crowd. It took Andre Francis 8 hours, 13 minutes of sheer determination, courage and guts to run and complete the New York City Marathon; Andre is a 32-year-old quadriplegic patient at Coler Memorial Hospital. Because his spinal cord is not completely severed at the neck, he maintains limited movement of his limbs. During the past year and a half Francis has been involved in a Sports Program at the hospital which includes swimming, table tennis, twice weekly runs with the Achilles Track Team, and workouts for shot put, javelin and discus throwing. He also attends weekly Bible classes and services in the Protestant Chapel.

Andre states that during those 26 miles, he never felt alone. "I kept pushing and pushing. All I thought about was finishing — I had to finish. I put my hand in God's and knew I would do it." According to Andre, the first and last mile were the toughest. "The Verrazano Bridge was rough — all uphill. I wanted to stop at times but I asked God for strength." Confusion about the last distance to the finish line disoriented Andre, but he kept stroking and stroking until the end.

As a member of the Achilles Track Team, Andre had an able-bodied sponsor who ran with him and had a large name tag across his chest with Andre Francis in big red letters. This meant that people all along the route were able to call out encouraging remarks saying "Come on Andre, you can do it. Go for it man." Andre's face lighted up as he recalls coming off the 59th Street Bridge and the crowds

cheering him through Queens, Harlem, the Bronx.

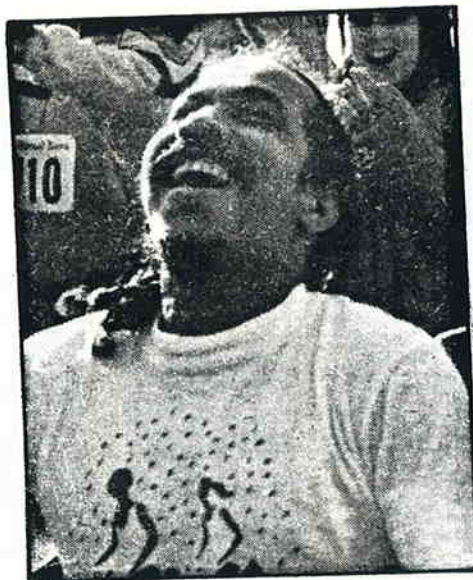
For most runners, finishing the marathon was indeed an accomplishment — for Andre Francis it was a triumph — a triumph over a physical disability caused by an accident five years ago. At first a coma patient at Kings County Hospital Center, Andre became conscious slowly. He began a rehabilitation program and was told by doctors after a year that he would never walk again. His wife took his young son and moved south.

Andre was transferred to Coler Memorial Hospital where he attended some physical and occupational therapy sessions. Then he began to drink, smoke pot, do anything not to have to deal with the reality of his life. He became abusive to both staff and patients; he just wanted to die. Before the accident he had been an avid sports participant in soccer, table tennis, swimming, all activities now beyond his reach.

About a year and a half ago a Sports Program was started at Coler Hospital in an effort to reach patients like Andre and get them involved in activities which would improve their self-image and give them a goal toward which they would work. Jim Beckford, the coach, recruited Andre to begin training for a wheelchair athletic meet and workouts began at Lighthouse Park.

And, slowly, Andre began to deal with his disability, with the effect it would have on the rest of his life. As the workouts increased, so did his determination to get better and walk. He returned to his rehabilitation medicine sessions. In Physical Therapy, he began to use the parallel bars and walk haltingly. Because of his months of inactivity, he developed foot drop and had the necessary corrective surgery. His youthful determination to accomplish something positive returned. And now Andre Francis does walk, with the use of one cane.

What is Andre's next goal? He intends to walk out of Coler with his family intact in an apartment in New York. He intends to obtain vocational training and pursue a job working with machines. Sports will continue to be important in his life and next year he intends to run even faster in the marathon.



ANDRE FRANCIS