



ALTERNATIVES

"The voice of the disabled community"

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New York Marathon: 13 Start, 13 Finish

by Patty Lee Parmalee

On a day when the heat and humidity were both near 80, making this year's New York City Marathon the most difficult ever, and the most troubled by casualties and dropouts, thirteen disabled runners started the race, and all thirteen finished. Many of them were running their first Marathon, while those who ran their first one last year bettered their time this year, in spite of the heat.

All but two of the runners had a three-hour head start from Staten Island, so they could end with the crowd rather than finish alone, after dark, as Linda Down had done when she ran the race in eleven hours without an early start. Each of the early beginners had a companion to carry water, direct traffic, and, when necessary, to take a pulse or repair crutches. All thirteen runners are members of the Achilles Track Club.

Despite the early hour, a few crowds had already gathered in Brooklyn and Queens, and they seemed delighted to watch the disabled runners. Moving into Manhattan, most of the Achilles members reached the city before the lead runners and were overtaken somewhere along First Avenue, where the cheers for those running on crutches and prosthesis were as loud as the shouts for the leaders. Over the last few miles in Central Park, disabled and nondisabled runners were traveling at the same speed, while at the finish line, medics, staffing an emergency area that looked like a set for a Civil War movie, had nothing but a few blisters to treat on the disabled. Yvonne Myvett, who has cerebral palsy, ran her first marathon ever, receiving good guidance on pace from her companion, Janet Nelson. Yvonne was fatigued at the end, but, says Janet, "Yvonne never lost sight of her goal or her

determination to do the very best she could. Coming into the finish line with her, with the crowd roaring their support, as they had been all the way from the 59th Street Bridge, was an experience I shall certainly never forget." With enough energy left to display a little vanity, Yvonne took off her glasses and gave them to Janet before crossing the finish line — then couldn't find her in the confusion that followed. Later, back at Janet's house, Yvonne said that she was ready to run again next year — with Janet accompanying her.

Another Achilles member, Al Reyes, ran with companion Tim Erson, an Achilles coach and physical therapist. Al, sixty-eight and a native of Vermont, had undergone quadruple bypass surgery during the summer, but decided to enter the Marathon because he had run quite a few races in respectable time before his surgery. Tim's plan was to take Al's pulse after every mile, and to have him walk whenever it rose above 110. In the last few miles, Al picked up speed, and finished

in just under six hours. Al went on to have further surgery, from which he has now recovered, and looks forward to running in many more marathons.

Andre Francis, a quadriplegic who participates in wheelchair racing, discovered running only this year, and has responded to the sport with great enthusiasm. His companion was Carl Landegger, a New York Road Runners Board Member. Carl wore a sign which read "My Friend's name is Andre," leading crowds along First Avenue to yell, "Andre, Andre!" Carl told him, "You know, Andre, you could run for Mayor."

Bob Greene spent a year in a hospital bed after a car accident left both his legs shattered. Two and a half years later, he completed the Marathon on Canadian crutches. His companion, Jim Beckford, who usually coaches wheelchair table tennis and doesn't get much aerobic exercise, collapsed at the 25 mile mark, so Bob finished alone.

J.P. Cruz, born with one leg from the effects of thalidomide, completed his first Marathon last

year in New York, and was later invited, along with Fred Lebow, New York Road Runners Club President, to attend the White House victory ceremony. This year, Fred rode in the press truck ahead of the lead runners, and just happened to pass as J.P. was spread-eagle over a car parked on First Avenue while several coaches worked on cramps in his arms and legs. Fred saw him and shouted, "John! Let's go!" In response, J.P. picked up his crutches and ran on through the crowds. He continued to have pain in his arms, but finished the race in good time.

Linda Down, running her third New York City Marathon on the crutches cerebral palsy requires her to use, caught one crutch in a grating as she crossed the 59th Street Bridge at the 16-mile mark, and broke it clean in half. Dick Traum, running his own sixth New York City Marathon on an artificial leg, sent his brother-in-law Jerry Chmielak to borrow crutches from a nearby hospital, but before Jerry could return, Dick managed to splint the two halves together, allowing Linda to finish the race a little more unevenly than usual, yet with a personal best time.

And then there was Dennis Kendrick, partially paralyzed, who started with the nondisabled runners, and finished his first marathon right along with them in a little over six hours, accompanied by so little fanfare that few realized he had a disability.

Yet Dennis himself knows what he has accomplished — a personal goal — as have Pat Griskus (amputee), Sandy Davidson (stroke), Tom O'Connor (visual impairment), Rich Torres (cerebral palsy), Paddy Rossback (amputee), and the rest, whether they finished their Marathons in five hours or eleven.

For information about the Achilles Track Club, open to all disabled runners, including beginners, call (212) 398-0348.

*Photo: Andre Francis
and Carl Landegger
at Mile 23*

