

A SPECIAL CLUB



The Achilles concept is based
on ability, not disability.
by Brian Caulfield

Pat Griskus runs the marathon in 3:44, five miles in 34 minutes, and finishes near the middle of the pack in most of his races, but he is not an average runner. Pat Griskus is an amputee who wears a prosthesis on the remaining portion of his left leg. Since taking up running almost two years ago, he has completed eight marathons and nine triathlons.

John Cruz also has only one leg, and also takes part regularly in marathons, 10k's and other races, covering the distances on crutches at a rapid painful pace. He finished his first marathon last year in New York, starting in the early morning hours, before the race's official start, and finishing some seven hours later. A few days afterward, he was invited to the White House, along with Fred Lebow and winners Rod Dixon and Grete Waitz, to meet with President Reagan.

Linda Down, a victim of cerebral palsy, runs on crutches. Her performance in the 1982 NYC Marathon, which she completed in darkness 11 hours and 54 seconds after she started, was hailed as widely as Alberto Salazar's victory.

All of these athletes, and many others who will run in this year's New York City Marathon, have something in common besides their various disabilities and an unusual strength and determination; they are all members of the Achilles Track Club, an organization for the disabled sponsored by the New York Road Runners Club, and founded by Dick Traum, a 43-year-old amputee who, in New York in 1976, became the first to finish a marathon with a prosthesis. In its short history, the Achilles club has had a great impact. Through its programs, promotions and, especially, the remarkable example of its members, it has redefined the term "disability" and made sports participation a viable reality for thousands who heretofore were confined to a life of inactivity. The operative theme behind the Achilles approach is that anyone can do something, and, given the opportunity and proper guidance, most can do more than imagined.

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Dick Traum was once overweight and in terrible shape. He was an athlete in school, but his playing days ended abruptly one afternoon in 1964, when he

was struck from behind by another vehicle while filling his car at a gas station. His right leg, injured beyond repair, became gangrous, and was amputated. Traum spent a year in a wheelchair before being fitted with an artificial leg. He was able to continue his career (he's founder and president of Personnelmetrics, a management consultant firm) and get around well enough, but there seemed to be no way to keep the weight off. His concern led him to a fitness class at the West Side Y. headed by Bob Glover. The class consisted of various activities, weight lifting, calisthenics, and running. When Traum went to sign up, he was asked if he could run. He'd never really tried since the accident, but, afraid he'd be turned away otherwise, he said that he could. And he did. Slowly, painfully, with a natural limp, he covered at first a half-mile, then a mile and a half, then miles at a time. No one in the class questioned his participation or his reason, and Traum did not see himself as unique. He recalls seeking advice on his running form from an instructor. "I asked him how other amputees did this, and he answered sort of cryptically, 'Just about how you do it.' I had no idea I was probably the only person in the country running with an artificial leg. I would've guessed there were about 5000 others."

Traum's relentlessness led inevitably to the marathon. He started the '76 race, the first through the five boroughs, four hours ahead of the pack. Pictures of him appeared in running magazines and newspapers throughout the country, and the concept of sports for disabled persons, advanced primarily by such programs as the Special Olympics and the Games for the Disabled, was given a phenomenal boost. The picture of Traum waging a lone struggle with himself and fatigue showed that fitness and the satisfaction it brings were as accessible to the handicapped as to the average sedentary American. One young man particularly moved by Traum's example was Terry Fox, who ran across Canada in 1980 on an artificial leg after undergoing amputation to slow the advance of bone cancer. Fox kept a picture of Traum above his hospital bed before the operation, and later Traum met with Fox and encouraged his transcontinental run to raise money for medical research.

Eventually, Traum developed the idea of a running clinic for the handicapped, and, in 1981, he approached

Fred Lebow, who pledged the NYRRC's support. Bob Glover, Traum's first instructor, was asked to handle the eight-week program. The clinic, in quantitative terms, was a bust. Only four signed up initially, and enrollment grew to only eight by the end. Undaunted, Glover suggested that the clinic be turned into a club, so that the few who were interested could meet and train and gain health benefits year round. The name Achilles was taken from the Greek warrior who was physically invulnerable except for the small area of his heel.

From the core of eight, the club has grown to 60, with about 35 competing in races regularly. Despite a fair amount of publicity, few members come unsolicited. Most, in fact, are brought into the fold by a method Traum calls "street recruiting." A member or coach will see a likely candidate in the park, on the street, in a race, or in a fitness class, and word of the club will be passed on. Many disabled persons welcome active recruiting, not so much because they are embarrassed to be seen running, but because they need to be reassured that they *can* do it and that it *is* good for them. For many, it is a reversal of what they have been taught and have come to accept.

The club meets Wednesdays year round at the NYRRC's International Running Center on East 89th St. At a recent meeting, six weeks before the Marathon, 20 or so squeezed into the club's one-room library, talking casually, discussing jobs, private lives, training. They could have been any club before a workout, except for the more than evident crutches, wheelchairs and prosthetic devices. At 6:30, Traum calls for attention and makes a few brief announcements about the Marathon, other upcoming races, and the evening's workout. He hands about pictures from a recent race, and one member shows him a magazine article reporting on a new line of lightweight wheelchairs. Patty Lee Parmalee, an instructor, announces that over the weekend Pat Griskus completed yet another triathlon, this one of Ironman proportion: 2.4-mile swim, 112-mile bike, marathon run. The others applaud, and then the group heads out to Central Park for a warmup. Traum and Parmalee go through a routine of movements and stretches that are performed by the members with various levels of proficiency. The group is divided into smaller groups based on abilities, not

abilities, and they head off along the park drive. Occasionally they impede the progress of faster runners, but there are no harsh comments; more often are heard words of encouragement.

It is easy to feel pity for these people, but none is accepted. They make no pretense of being an athletic club in the full sense, but they do claim to be a club for athletes. As with most clubs, many members join simply to get in shape, relieve boredom, find an outlet for energy, ambitions, frustrations. And, as with most clubs, participation and self-fulfillment are stressed above achievement. In absolute terms, Achilles athletes perform to their limits and beyond as often, if not more often, than athletes on any other club.

A big step for each Achilles member is the first race, be it a mile, a 5k, or marathon. After that baptism, the spirit so common to those who've spent years or whole lifetimes overcoming disabilities surges forth, and the individual begins to see himself or herself as a runner. It is this spirit that moves Sandy Davidson, a 49-year-old stroke victim, who ran his first marathon last year; and Paddy Rossbach, who this October seeks to become the first female leg amputee to complete a marathon; and Janice Rehcamp, a grandmother with an artificial leg, who, after her first race, demanded a new prosthesis because the one she'd been given was for "old people"; and Andre Francis, a quadriplegic, who has finished a 10k race in a wheelchair.

Wheelchair athletes have been a source of controversy for the NYC Marathon. The NYRRC welcomes wheelchairs in all its races except the Marathon, explaining that vehicles which can approach speeds of 60 miles-per-hour on downhills are hazardous in a race with many thousands of runners. The ban on wheelchairs was adopted by the NYRRC's Board of Directors, of which Traum is a member, and has been upheld in the courts. Still, a few wheelchair competitors have been accepted into the Marathon each year, by special request.


When the Achilles club was formed, there was suspicion that the NYRRC was seeking to allay criticism and win points in court, but Traum denies such a motive. Still, he is ambivalent about the wheelchair issue. "I walk in the middle," he says. "If I were in a wheelchair, I would want to participate in the Marathon. But I can understand people who are organizing an event not wanting to compromise the safety of all, and risking lawsuits from people who get hurt."

The importance of Achilles, as

Traum sees it, is in providing alternatives and opportunities for the disabled. "What we are doing today is comparable to what Nina Kuscsik and other pioneers did for women's running ten years ago. Just as women have shown that they can be athletes, that they can perform and improve, so we are showing that handicapped persons can be athletes and can enjoy the same benefits from running as anyone else."

The home run hitter among amputee athletes is Griskus. At 5-11, 150 lbs., and with a trim, muscled physique and close-cropped hair, he looks every bit the ex-Marine he is. He was a 4:28 miler in school and could run 100 yards in 9.8 seconds, before he "met up with the '59 Rambler." In 1967, at age 19, while stationed in Kansas City, Griskus was hit head on by the Rambler while riding his motorcycle. Following his amputation, he spent one day in a wheelchair before switching to crutches and eventually a prosthesis. He was given an honorable

discharge from the Marines and sent home, where he fully realized that his "miling days were over." Griskus went through a bad spell, drinking too much and giving in to despair, but he pulled himself through, and in the past two years has proved himself to be not only a great disabled athlete, but an exceptional athlete, period. Last year he ran 3:55 in the NYC Marathon, and he improved his best to 3:44 in Boston last April. Griskus, a freelance writer, trains almost full-time in and around his Waterbury, Connecticut, home, cycling 200 miles a week, swimming regularly, and covering up to 60 miles on foot, "depending on the condition of my stump." His goal for New York is sub-3:40.

"I'll compete against time and against as many people as I can beat," he says. "Competition is not charitable. No one gives me a break, and I won't give anyone else a break. It helps keep me motivated. I could find a lot of excuses for not doing anything at all." 

ORANGE COUNTY POST

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Bob Green of Middletown, told by doctors that he would never be able to leave his bed following an accident, has proved them wrong. He races nearly every weekend and on Sunday had a personal record of 1:57 in the 10K.

2 * WARWICK valley DISPATCH, AUGUST 1, 1984



FINISHER - Robert Green of Middletown finished last Saturday's Rotary 10K despite being on crutches. His time was 1:06.55.

Photo by Ron Nowak