

An Interview with. . . .

# LINDA DOWN

by Kathleen Gavin



Linda Down has the dubious honor of holding the record for the longest New York City Marathon time in the history of the race. She is also the first woman with cerebral palsy to complete the course.

After only 5 months of training and one mini-marathon behind her, she finished the grueling 26.2 mile course through all 5 of New York City's boroughs in 11 hours. Since then, she has become a regular runner, completing another marathon in 1983 and cutting her time by 2 hours and 15 minutes. She is a charter member of The Achilles Running Club which is a running club for disabled people sponsored by the New York City Road Runners Club. This year she plans to run an "anniversary run" in the L'eggs Mini-Marathon on June 2 in New York City and the London Marathon on May 13.

Rehabilitation WORLD decided to interview Ms. Down for this special issue and I met with her in April at RW offices.

**RW:** How did you start running?

**LD:** It stemmed from an exercise program I had started in order to lose weight. My doctor suggested I try running. So I did and I ran in the L'eggs Mini-Marathon in 1982. I went back to my doctor and said, "I tried running and I'm going to run in the New York City Marathon." I think he was a little shocked.

**RW:** Was he supportive or did he try to discourage you?

**LD:** He was supportive, but he didn't know a lot about running. I really didn't have a coach or anyone to tell me what I was doing right or wrong. You're supposed to build up by doing lots of short distance runs but I kept running longer and longer distances. I was killing myself, not knowing what

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I was doing. I was really doing it by the seat of my pants.

I was having a lot of trouble with my hip. I had had surgery on my knees and my hip. Whenever I'd hit eight miles I had terrific pains in my hip. So I went to an orthopedist and he checked me out and I asked him, "Can I run in the New York City Marathon?" and he just looked at me like, "Oh boy, your hip can only take so much pressure," but he told me that I wouldn't hurt myself irrevocably, I would just experience the pain. So I did a lot of conditioning exercises to alleviate the pain and strengthen my knees.

After I ran the marathon, I read how you're SUPPOSED to prepare for a marathon—that you're supposed to run for a year and a half, I had run only five months; that you're supposed to run at least three days a week, I ran only two. I did so many things wrong. Now we have the advantage of the 'Achilles Club. We have a physical therapist who works with new club members. We have coaches who work with us and other team members who can give pointers like "if you run with crutches do this and don't do that."

When I ran in the L'eggs mini-marathon, I didn't have gloves. When I realized half-way through as blisters were forming, I should've had gloves, it was too late. I came home with big welts on my hands. My feet were fine, but my hands were killing me.

So all those things are things that someone coming into the Club would have the advantage of knowing, where as when I started, I didn't have any support. I was on my own.

**RW:** Lacking proper training, support and even evidence of other runners around you, what made you keep going when you got tired or discouraged in the 1982 Marathon?

**LD:** The first couple of miles were hard because we had head winds and I, being the last person to cross the bridge, was by myself, so I was getting *all* the head winds. And there were things I didn't know about the course, like that the first mile of the Verrazano Bridge was all uphill. I just thought, "Oh my God, I'll never make this, this is so hard," and that was on the first mile! Then I realized, when I hit the level section of the bridge, that I had been going uphill.

What kept me going was all the sup-

port the people on the street gave me. I remember this very beautiful little blond girl who was about nine, came running up to me and said "You gotta make it, you gotta make it" and she was just so enthusiastic and effervescent and her whole face lit up. I was running in the middle of the street so she really had to run up to me and she was just so innocent. She really wanted me to make it to the end and that was very encouraging.

**RW:** How did the race go for you in 1983 compared to 1982?

**LD:** I had to walk at some points in 1983. I walked over the Queensboro Bridge because it has metal plates on it and it was raining and sleeting, so I

couldn't run because I'd slide and fall. I slowed down on the bridge but I still finished it about 2 hours and 15 minutes faster.

**RW:** And you were running the whole time in 1982?

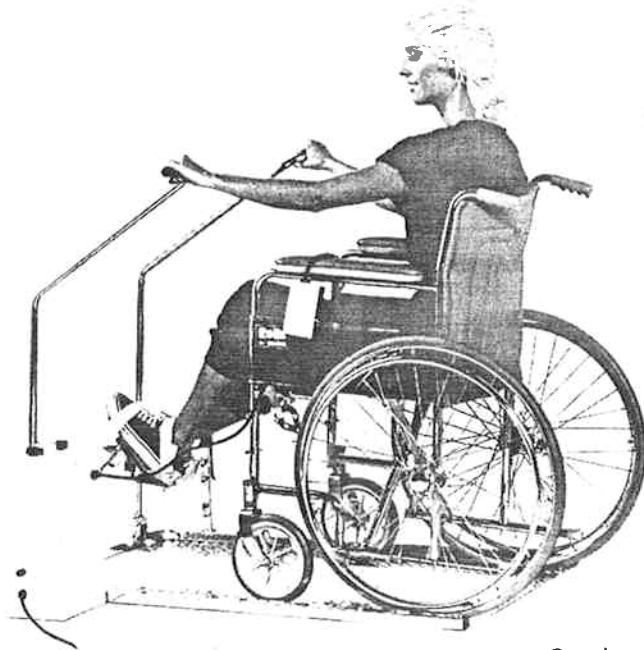
**LD:** Running, walking, dragging. I felt much stronger the second year because I had another year of running behind me.

**RW:** In 1983 you had a head start. How did you feel in the 1983 Marathon when the other runners began and then passed you?

**LD:** We were at about the half-way mark when they passed us. I remember

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*Kathleen Gavin is Assistant Editor of Rehabilitation WORLD*

Winnipeg in 1980, the Commission on Leisure, Recreation, and Sports was organized as the Seventh Standing Commission of R.I. I was named as First Chairman of the Commission. One of our early aims in the Commission was to promote integrated leisure time activities as much as we have competitive sports.

The first meeting of the Commission, abbreviated to RESPO, is to be held April 19-23, 1984 in Japan. It is anticipated that 1000 people from 30 countries will attend and enjoy such events as shellfish-gathering, badminton, wheelchair tennis, table-tennis, dance, yachting and motor-boating, orienteering, singing, music, bowling, a variety of new non-competitive sports and arts and crafts.

#### Tasks for the Future

1. The FESPIC Games, as I stated above, promoted friendship and cooperation throughout the region, encouraged the formation of new national organizations in countries that had none, and served as a replacement for the more distant and expensive international games. I think this concept should be duplicated in other regions and regional winners would then go on to the international games.

2. Integrated games for all the disabled are by far the more desirable form for these events. It is not at all effective to hold games by separate disabilities. On the other hand it is reasonable to promote the games event by event such as basketball, marathon, and archery.

3. Certainly, light sports for leisure and recreation should concern all of us more than they have.

4. Doctors, physical and occupational therapists should know more about sports for the disabled. Furthermore, more instructors should be trained.

Above all I wish sports for the disabled to develop more and more. ■

Linda Down

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crossing the Queensboro Bridge and Grete Waitz just passed me and I thought, "Wow, Grete Waitz just passed me in a race!" Come to think of it, most everybody passed me! Another big thrill was coming off the Queensboro Bridge and seeing the crowds on First Avenue whereas when I hit that point the year before there was NOBODY there. And the runners were

really great when they passed me, they'd put their arms around me, or clap or say "Bravo" or "Keep Going" and I felt like in some way, I gave them support. Some of the people would say, "I'm gonna make it now," not in a maudlin way, but in a healthy way. I think we all inspired each other. I think having disabled runners has to be—I'd like to get away from the word inspirational, but I can't think of another word—but it does help give you the feeling that you can do it too. I think it sets a positive example.

**RW:** I know the New York City Road Runners Club runs together. When they do, does the Achilles Club run with them or do you run separately?

**LD:** When there's a regular race going on we will run together depending on the length of the race. If it's a long race like 10 miles or something like that, we'll get a head start. If it's a three-miler, we'll start with everyone else. When we get head starts we do it like this: we basically estimate how much time we'll need as a group and we'll figure out who's running with who. Usually partners are decided upon depending on how fast the person runs and where they are in terms of training. We take people into the Club from the beginning if that's where they are and keep with them until they've developed some kind of running style or any speed. So we pair off and choose starting times depending on what the person's ability is and how much time we think we'll need to complete the course. I think we're the only disabled running club that is integrated with a non-disabled running club, whereas most running groups or sports organizations for the disabled tend to be segregated.

**RW:** When you're racing with other disabled runners do you feel any special camaraderie with them?

**LD:** I don't run with them only because my speed is different. In other words we basically keep to our own paces. But I feel connected to them through the team. During the 1982 NYC Marathon I was basically running all alone, shortly after the race started. When I got to Brooklyn I said, "Well that was fun, but where's the marathon?"

**RW:** Runners talk about the loneliness of marathon running, I think you probably know more about that than anyone else.

**LD:** Well, my family followed me and

a film crew began following me, so that was kind of nice because I had company even though they weren't runners. They were really very helpful but, yeah, I was kind of out there all by myself. In a way I still felt awkward about running, so it was kind of a relief not to feel on the spot, because I do kind of stick out. I still wanted to run no matter how anybody reacted to me and I haven't gotten any negative reaction but I guess I really didn't feel comfortable about myself running, so sometimes being alone was a relief. I didn't have to try to keep pace with anyone else and I never felt like I was dropping far behind because I was last and there was no one to keep up with. They were already all gone so that took pressure off.

There were moments when it was very lonely, when I felt like I was missing the marathon because part of what I was looking forward to was being part of a group of people running and that wasn't happening. In answer to your question about camaraderie with the disabled—this year, 1983, when I ran I had the opportunity to run with team members as part of the Achilles Club. We started three hours earlier and we had somebody carry water and oranges before the aid stations opened up. Part of the fun of that was having a real sense of being in a race and being involved with other runners. People on the side of the road called out "way to go Achilles" and that was nice because I had been in on the beginning of the Club, watched it grow and accumulate members. It was nice being cheered on not only as an individual, but as a club and what that represents, which is support for a running club for disabled people.

**RW:** Do you participate in any other sports besides running?

**LD:** I'm toying with the idea of learning how to ski. I found out about a group called the 52 Association. They have adapted crutch tips you can use that are actually crutches with little skis at the bottom. I'd like to try that, but I'm a little nervous.

When I run, I run like a skier in that I use my crutches like skiers use their poles. I also use my hips the way a skier does and will sometimes weave in and out and balance myself as a skier does. I still have problems with my balance though, I can lose it easily so I'd be nervous about skiing. It's on the back burner. I'm concentrating on running now. ■