

Sitting around doing nothing's not for them

About a dozen members of the Achilles Track Club had just finished their weekly run in Central Park and were crossing Manhattan's Fifth Avenue when the traffic light a block away turned green. On came the cars and taxis, but club president Dick Traum, who was lagging behind the rest, hopped off the curb and quickly bolted across the street, beating the traffic and rejoining

the group.

Traum smiled. "I really shouldn't go around cheating red lights like that, but it's sure nice to know I can."

Two years ago, Traum, an amputee with an artificial leg, had enough trouble making it across the street even when he did have the light. The leg made walking difficult, and limping from sidewalk to sidewalk before the light

changed was often a terrifying experience. These days, he "runs" 26.2-mile marathons almost as often as he runs lights. "Now I have the confidence in myself and my abilities, and that's very important to a disabled person."

Confidence is what the Achilles Track Club is all about. The 40 members bring different handicaps — one is blind, one has paralysis, several are amputees — but they all share the same goals: to remain active and to continue to feel good about themselves.

In wheelchairs and on crutches, they run, limp or wheel around the park each Wednesday evening, keeping themselves in shape, pushing themselves just a little bit harder, and preparing for upcoming marathons like the New York Marathon in October.

One of the club's members, John Cruz, ran the entire marathon on crutches last year, and was flown to the White House two days later to be congratulated by President Reagan. Another woman, Linda Down, took 11 hours, but finished the race on crutches.

Patrick Griskus entered his first marathon last year in Connecticut despite an artificial leg. He has since run a grueling race up and down Mt. Washington, N.H. where he finished ahead of half the pack. He also participated in three triathlons (which combine running, swimming and biking) and the Empire State Run, where he ran up the stairs of the skyscraper in 16½ minutes.

Griskus prepared more than a year for his first marathon. "The marathon became more important to me because of my handicap," he said. "I saw it as something a lot of people would consider impossible or insane, and I wanted to prove it wasn't. It might be easy for some (handicapped) people to give up, but not me. I've always been a

competitor."

His biceps bulged and the veins threatened to pop through his skin as the group of athletes exercised in the New York Road Runners Club, which sponsors the Achilles club. The 36-year-old Griskus was athletic before the motorcycle accident which claimed part of his leg 17 years ago, but he insists he is in better shape today because it means even more to him.

"After I lost my leg I lost confidence in myself and my abilities," he said. "Now I know I can do almost anything."

Most of the club members do not share Griskus' athletic talent. However, each participant runs, walks or wheels at his or her own pace, and each encourages the others. As members naturally fall into groups of two or three based on pace, the sight in Central Park might first jar

other joggers, though by now the handicapped members of the 1½-year-old group are a common sight.

On a recent Wednesday, one group included a woman with crutches almost pulling her legs along with her. Far ahead, a blind man ran with a woman, each holding one end of a towel between them as a guide so the man would not stray off the course or bump into anything. Another couple included a one-legged man in his early twenties balancing himself perfectly on crutches. He encouraged a 60-year-old woman with an artificial leg as she walked slowly with a cane.

The woman, Janice Rehkamp, joined Achilles last summer, and has driven 2 hours from Connecticut every Wednesday to work out with the group since. She was fitted with the artificial

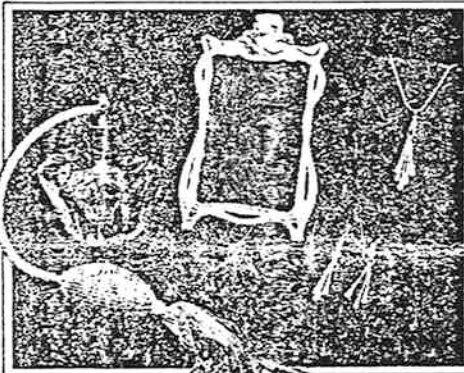
limb after she lost her own to cancer two years ago, but her new leg isn't designed for the 3 miles of walking she's up to now. That hasn't stopped the grandmother of 10, though; nor have the welts which develop sometimes after a long walk. Until recently, Mrs. Rehkamp was another amputee who had trouble crossing the street. Now her goal is to play tennis again.

"I feel better walking than sitting around and doing nothing," she said. "I've met so many amputees and that's all they do. In fact, so many people my age who aren't disabled do nothing but sit around all day. Now that's my idea of a handicap."

(The Achilles Track Club can be reached at 530-2310.)

— ERIC SHERMAN

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From left, Tad Gridler, John Paul Cruz and Achilles Track Club president Dick Traum go a few laps in Central Park.

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