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Marathon Is Last Barrier For a Disabled Runner

By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN

Aaron Shor wobbled into Central Park, shaky on the limbs that have been diseased for most of his life. An ambulance roared past. "Oh good," he said, turning to his friend, Joy Werner. "They know I'm here."

And then, Mr. Shor and Ms. Werner laughed, something they do a lot as they move through the park at a 23-minute-a-mile clip, something they intend to do for many of the 11 or 12 hours it will probably take Mr. Shor to finish the New York City Marathon on Sunday. "It's all right," said Mr. Shor, gathering up for the punch line. "I didn't make dinner reservations for that night."

Training Nourishes Friendships

By his own reckoning, Mr. Shor may well be the slowest entrant in the race. Even in the Achilles Track Club, a group of 150 disabled runners to which he belongs, Mr. Shor, a 31-year-old freelance writer from Manhattan, gets an hour's head start in most events. Then again, when he began training a year ago, he could not limp from one street light to the next.

For almost every competitor, the New York City Marathon is a race with a hidden agenda — a defiance of age, a triumph over heartache, a denial of physical limits. For the members of the Achilles Track Club, the marathon also attests to the friendships that develop between the runners with handicaps or severe diseases and the unimpaired

volunteers who train with them.

The president of the track club, Dick Traum, has usually dissuaded the same runner and trainer from working out together too often. The relationship can become too exclusive, too dependent, he said, and some runners may even begin to resent others, which is dangerous when mutual support is so much the track club's mission.

But in the case of Mr. Shor and Ms. Werner, Mr. Traum seems to have knowingly looked the other way, perhaps because they were friends long before the training began. They met five years ago, when Mr. Shor was developing broadcast advertisements for Gimbel's and Ms. Werner was on the crew shooting some Christmas gift spots. Their affinity was immediate.

"We have similar personalities," Ms. Werner said.

"Sick," Mr. Shor said, finishing the sentence, something each friend frequently does for the other. He went on: "We tend to find humor in just about anything. Whether it's appropriate or not. We're the kind of people who could go to a funeral and have a hilarious time."

One night, as the two were on their way to a restaurant, Mr. Shor slipped and fell. He looked up from the sidewalk and told Ms. Werner, "I pulled a Baryshnikov." The next day she called him at work. When the receptionist asked who wanted to speak to Mr. Shor, Ms. Werner said, "His dance teacher."

Such levity suited Mr. Shor fine. Gallows humor, not hand holding, had helped sustain him. For example, his disease was originally diagnosed as muscular dystrophy. "When I

Aaron Shor with his friend Joy Werner as he trained in Central Park for the New York City Marathon.

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For a Disabled Runner, Marathon Is Last Barrier

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didn't die," he said, "they had to throw that idea out."

At one point, the ailment so perplexed doctors that they called it "Shor's disease." Finally, a few years ago, it was determined to be polymyositis, a gradual and inexorable breakdown of the muscles and nerves. For Mr. Shor, it means, among other things, that his head often tilts back because his neck muscles falter and that stepping up on a curb qualifies as "a pole vault."

However bullish he tried to be, Mr. Shor sometimes surrendered to the frustration. There were times when he would come home from a bad day of work and his legs would just give out. In his anger, he would punch the wall, and in time he had left seven fist-sized holes. To cheer hi up, Ms. Werner once decorated the holes with a variety of oddities — a Grand Mariner box, a roll of toilet paper, a radio-station calendar.

Something about the New York City Marathon had always fascinated Mr. Shor, and then, in 1983, he read about Linda Down, Miss Down, who suffered from cerebral palsy, completed the race on crutches in 11 hours 54 seconds. She earned a White House welcome from President Reagan, and when she entered the marathon again in 1984, (like all Achilles members, starting several hours before the nondisabled runners) Mr. Shor was watching.

"I was standing along East 75th Street, about the 17-mile mark," he said. "I worked my way to the front row. And I heard all this cheering. I thought maybe it was the leaders, but I didn't see the cars that escort them. It was Linda coming along.

"And I felt embarrassment. And

envy. Because she was doing it and I wasn't. Because there was a concrete fruit to her labor. Because I saw all it required was hard work. The only thing keeping me from doing the marathon was me. I thought, 'Remove the last barrier.' The next week, I went down to Achilles."

Within a few days, Mr. Shor shared his aspiration with Ms. Werner. "I thought, 'What kind of drugs did you

A sponsorship conflict involving the New York City Marathon and its star runner was resolved. Page D24.

take last night?'" she said. "I didn't know what to say. Here's someone who has trouble walking, and how can he do 26 miles? My concern was that he not hurt himself. And yet I didn't want to say no."

She followed Mr. Shor's progress as he began training with another volunteer, Sue Erson, and advanced from a few street lamps to a mile to his first

race, a two-miler he completed in 57 minutes 30 seconds. She heard him exult when he found his name and time for a five-mile race listed in New York Running News. In July, she began to accompany him, and they have since gone as far as 15.5 miles together.

When they walk through the park, they cut a curious figure — a tall, slender woman with an athlete's gait, and a shorter man with a kind of wobbly swagger, like some guy who has just won a game of eight ball in a Baryshnikov bar and is heading for a celebratory beer.

Because Mr. Shor has trouble looking down, Ms. Werner watches the ground for obstacles. An acorn, wet leaves, a crack in the asphalt — any of these could make Mr. Shor slip. Sometimes a truck will rumble too close or a group of bicyclists will approach from behind like swarming bees.

Then Ms. Werner will warn Mr. Shor to change direction. "Don't pull a Baryshnikov," she will say. She will hold one hand near him, ready to catch him if he falls. But she will never actually touch him, because that, somehow, would be to concede.

"I don't know much about Aaron's illness," said Ms. Werner, a documentary producer from Hackensack, N.J., who is 30. "I do know that some-

times when I look in his eyes I can see the pain. But I don't know myself how much it is." She began to smile. "All I know is he told me that if I want him to drop out of the marathon, I better bring a gun."

With the days shorter and the training distances longer, the two often work out into the evening, a couple moving slowly through the Central Park darkness.

During the training, Mr. Shor began to defeat his disease. The destruction of muscle tissue is measured by the body's production of an enzyme known as CPK. Since last August, Mr. Shor's CPK count, once 10 times normal, has fallen by half. Running the race has become a metaphor for another kind of victory.

"Always hanging over me is this image of crossing the finish line," he said. "I see maybe 10 or 15 people waiting for Joy and me. Some Achilles people, mostly our friends. There's a lot of cheering, a lot of clapping. As they see me coming over that last hill, it's like, 'There he is.' It doesn't matter who finished first. It's my race now. Part of it is elation. And part is sadness, that it's over."

Ms. Werner listened as he spoke. She knows he is worried about the emotional letdown. Her antidote, as always, was humor.

"If you do Mount McKinley next year," she put in, "I'm out of here."

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