

Blind Runner

They 'cheered him like nuts' as he crossed St. Peter's Square

By MARK YOUNG

Loss of sight at age 27 is not an easy thing to accept, especially for an athlete. For Jeffrey Pledger of White Plains, however, blindness has served as the motivation to excel.

In September 1984 Pledger was stricken with cryptococcal meningitis and encephalitis and went blind. A football and basketball star at Harrison High School as a teenager, he found it difficult to accept that he would no longer be able to participate in athletics or perform daily activities as he had before.

But Pledger's determination and pride did not allow him to accept his blindness as a handicap. In April 1985 he was accepted for guide dog training at Guiding Eyes for the Blind in Yorktown Heights and one month later received a golden retriever named Vincenzo. The dog has enabled him to become more mobile and independent as well as giving him the capability to take on running as a hobby.

White Plains residents periodically come to see the man and his dog running through the streets of town each morning. Pledger and Vincenzo jog five to six miles each day. Both wear reflective vests, with Pledger using his sense of hearing and Vincenzo's leash as guides for the run.

"My mother gets nervous when we go out running," Pledger explained. "But my dog and my ears allow me to run with little difficulty."

He added, "Running is a great sport for me to be involved in because I can vent my frustrations on blindness."

Since learning to run with Vincenzo, Pledger has entered several races. In October 1985 he ran a 15-kilometer walkathon and raised \$8,000 for Guiding Eyes for the Blind. In other events he raised \$4,000 for the training of guide dogs.

In January 1986 Pledger joined the Achilles Track Club of Manhattan, the handicapped division of the New York City Road Runners Club, and began training to run marathons and other long-distance races.

Running with a guide, to whom he's attached by a tether (Vincenzo refuses to run more than eight miles), he competed in his first New York City Marathon in November 1986. He finished in 3:59:39.

He founded the Westchester Chapter of the Achilles Track Club in March 1987, coaching seven handicapped runners. They suffer from blindness, cerebral palsy, and learning disabilities.

"The purpose of Achilles is to



SPECIAL MOMENT—Pope John Paul II blesses White Plains resident Jeffrey Pledger who has not let blindness stop him from competing in road running. Jeffrey ran in this year's Rome marathon and then had a private audience with the pope.

motivate the handicapped back into society and make me do it," he said. "I tell all of my runners that the completion of the race is what counts. They should say to themselves, 'I started, I'm going to finish.'"

"I've learned to be more compassionate toward people since I've become disabled," he said. "I work harder to help others and to be a leader."

Pledger ran in his second New York City Marathon in November 1987, completing the race in 3:58:56 and was the recipient of the 1987 Achilles Runner of the Year Award.

His greatest athletic achievement, however, occurred two months ago, when he flew to Italy to compete in the 1988 Rome Marathon. Pledger said fan support was strong as he ran in the streets of Italy's capital on April 26. He described running through St. Peter's Square as the highlight of the event.

"The people of Italy have a really good attitude about running and supporting the handicapped," he said. "They were cheering like nuts in St. Peter's Square."

Pledger finished the race in 3:59:43 and received honorable mention at the awards ceremony.

After the race he had a private audience with Pope John Paul II.

"It was an awesome experience. The man knows sport, speed," he

said. "I'm real happy that through the efforts of my parish and the Knights of Columbus, of which I am a member, that I was able to go to Rome."

Pledger, who serves as a lector at St. Anthony's parish using a braille version of the readings, said that his Catholic faith has given him the strength to accept his handicap and to strive to excel.

"I have tried to accept my visual impairment as an inconvenience rather than a tragedy," he said.

"Through my faith in God I have developed an inner strength that has helped me carry on with my life."

A graduate of Westchester Community College, Pledger will attend New York University this fall in pursuit of a master's of business administration degree in marketing. His professional goal is to become a director of management information systems.

He will not neglect his hobby, however. Pledger plans to compete in upcoming races in Poland and Brazil.



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MOTIVATION—Although blinded at the age of 27, Jeffrey Pledger has used his handicap to spur him on, as he is shown here, right, finishing one of the numerous races he has entered.