

## Health & Fitness

### Breaking the "Can't Do" Barrier

*The disabled are challenging all limits with pluck and high tech*

Every avid golfer has a "handicap," but Steve Gandy has a real one. An insurance agent in Van, Texas, the 36-year-old Gandy has no hands. He lost them in an accident 14 years ago, and has to hold his clubs with metal prostheses. Still, Gandy often heads for the links and shoots a respectable 85 or so for 18 holes. Debbie La Plante, 21, a sophomore at the University of Toledo, enjoys racing in marathons. Her best time in the grueling 26.2-mile

tional stereotype of passivity is broken."

Support groups are springing up all over. The National Handicapped Sports and Recreation Association has grown from 20 to 60 chapters in the past six years. The Achilles Track Club for disabled runners, started in 1982, has 25 chapters in 14 states. Special programs and events, sponsored by such groups as the U.S. Amputee Athletic Association and the National Wheelchair Athletic

pressurized tires, they are sleek and maneuverable chariots, weighing a mere 10 lbs. Space-age plastics and other materials have made artificial legs and feet lighter, stronger, more flexible and resilient, and much more comfortable to wear. At least six models of prosthetic feet are available (cost: \$500 to \$2,000 each). When amputee Jim MacLaren, 25, of New Haven, Conn., participates in triathlons, he wears a different type of artificial leg for the biking and running segments. He swims without a prosthesis.

As such aids become more sophisticated, many handicapped athletes have begun comparing their performances with those of their able-bodied competitors.



Sharon Hedrick wins an exhibition race in Seoul

event is 3 hr. 31 min. That may not be a world record, but it is impressive enough for someone who was born with spina bifida, is paralyzed from the waist down and races in a wheelchair. *Ski Racing* magazine named Diana Golden, 25, the U.S. Alpine Skier of 1988 for her unusual skill and courage. Golden, who at age twelve lost a leg to cancer, schusses down slopes on a single ski.

Such inspiring stories, once unheard of, are increasingly common these days. Just a decade ago, the physically handicapped were consigned by doctors, families and themselves to a life hemmed in by "can't dos." Today they are challenging all limits and proving they can succeed in virtually every sport. About 50,000 disabled Americans, from amputees and the blind to those with spinal-cord injuries or cerebral palsy, are taking up everything from cycling and scuba diving to rock climbing and rafting. That is still a small fraction of the 37 million handicapped in the U.S. But, declares Dave Kiley, 34, of Pomona, Calif., a star wheelchair-basketball player, "the tradi-



Achilles founder Traum runs in Manhattan

Association, are burgeoning. In October, 376 Americans went to Seoul to compete in the eighth Paralympics Games for handicapped athletes. And the disabled are also entering competitions alongside the able-bodied. This month's New York City Marathon attracted some 100 handicapped racers. Says Achilles founder Dick Traum, 48, an amputee: "It's fun to do things that seem to be impossible."

The growing movement is being helped by dramatic advances in equipment and prostheses. Says Kirk Bauer, executive director of NHSRA: "The top is literally being blown off of what we can do because of the new high-tech equipment." Ten years ago, wheelchairs were unwieldy 50-lb. clunkers. Now, thanks to lightweight steel alloys and thin high-



Bob Wieland competes in a triathlon in Hawaii

But some people are concerned that the disabled may be pushing too hard, embracing activities such as rock climbing and marathon running that are extreme even for the healthy. Handicapped athletes have to expend up to 50% more energy in an event than the unimpaired do.

Some organizations are trying to play down what NHSRA's Bauer calls the "super-gimp" image and are promoting sports for general fitness, recreation and sociability. But many of the handicapped need more than a pastime. For them, every obstacle hurdled is a measure of self-respect, competence and independence. Zoe Koplowitz, 40, has multiple sclerosis, yet she completed her first marathon this month. Her time in the New York race: 19 hr. 15 min. To prepare for running, she attended dance classes to develop a rhythmic gait, then took lessons in aikido to learn how to get up after a fall. The effort was worth it, says Koplowitz. "Now, every time I put my foot on the pavement it is an affirmation of life."

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