



Courtesy Timex

## In Memoriam

## Patrick Griskus

"If there is anything special about me," wrote Patrick Griskus, "it resides in the fact that I have come to appreciate, for me, that there can be no shortcuts, every race mile must be paid for relentlessly." He added, "I'm pleased and proud that on race day my effort is as close to total as I can make it."

That kind of determination helped Griskus, about whom much was special, become, by a huge margin, the greatest amputee runner in the world. His phenomenal PR of 3:31 for the marathon would make him the envy of many well-trained runners.

Pat Griskus died October 3 at the age of 39 while on the verge of tackling another challenge, his third Ironman Triathlon. He was bicycling with a group of riders in Hawaii when a concrete mixing truck approached from behind. The pouring chute on the truck was not fastened down and was swinging freely; the chute struck Griskus in the head, and he died instantly.

Griskus was widely publicized for his athletic accomplishments, but he impressed those who knew him even more with his selfless generosity. "He was incredibly caring about the average person," states New York Road Runners Club running class coach Bob Glover. "He would go out of his way for other people. Pat, an early member of the Achilles Track Club, would drive two hours each way just to help the people in

Achilles. He didn't need the workout; he was way beyond them." Patty Parmalee, who coaches the Achilles Team, adds, "Here's a guy who's holding a world record, but he wouldn't in any way let that affect what he shared with other people."

Griskus grew up in Waterbury, Connecticut, where he was a 4:52 miler at Wilby High School. At 19, with the Marines in Kansas City, he was riding a motorcycle when a truck operated by a drunk driver slammed into him. His left leg had to be amputated six inches below the knee. He took a tailspin after the accident; there were drinking problems and severe depression. After his bouts of despair, he started conditioning himself with weights, followed by swimming and running. He was a mainstay of pickup basketball games. The intrepid Griskus also climbed mountains and parachuted from airplanes.

"Running," surmises Glover, "really brought his life back together." Griskus saw an article about Dick Traum, whose 1976 New York City Marathon effort was believed to be the first by an amputee, and was inspired to emulate him.

A prosthetic leg designed by another Connecticut native, Richard Press of Stratford, helped Griskus overcome some of the problems inherent in most artificial legs. As *Running Times* reported, "With his new leg Griskus has revised our notions of the limits of amputee athletic performance." The leg, his surest ally in competition, was affectionately dubbed "Fred."

Besides his disability, Griskus had other hurdles to surmount. One bout of sciatica left him nearly unable to walk. Moreover, the Boston Athletic Association rejected his request to run the Boston Marathon, until Griskus debuted with a 4:11 at the John English Marathon in Middletown, Connecticut.

Dick Traum, the President of the Achilles Track Club and a close friend of Griskus, estimates that Griskus raced over 100 times in four years. Besides the 3:31 marathon, he'd broken 15 hours at the Ironman, run a sub-35:00 five miler, and a 5:07 mile. In the 1986 Empire State Run-Up his PR of 15:46 placed him 40th in a field of 70 men.

In New Hampshire's Mt. Washington Roadrace, eight miles straight up the highest peak in New England, two runners passing Griskus early on saw his prosthetic leg and gasped. "God bless you!" As Griskus told Traum, he passed the same pair at the seven-mile mark and wanted to return their blessing, but thought it would be "too cute."

Griskus, who had studied commu-

nications at Fairfield University, was a financial consultant and a freelance writer, often detailing his own travails and achievements as an amputee athlete. Yet as Dick Traum explains, Griskus was "really a professional athlete," who in competition represented the Timex Corporation, which is headquartered near his Waterbury home. It seemed like a natural pairing. The watch and the runner prided themselves on their durability.

"Pat was a team player," says Traum, who feels the death of Griskus as a terrible loss. "He was someone who might have been very active in coaching Achilles after his competitive career had ended. He came off as having a great deal of confidence, and he was a great motivator. It rubbed off on other athletes." Griskus did not hesitate to advise anyone, even one prodigy, Scott Mathis of Atlanta, whom Traum says "was getting good enough so that at some point he might beat Pat. But he spent hours on the phone helping him."

Griskus, remembers Patty Parmalee, "was very gung-ho. It was like he refused to admit he had a disability. He trained harder for endurance sports than anyone I have ever seen." He had also run "faster than some very successful athletes," notes Traum. "They would sprint in the last quarter mile and he would beat them. They'd be upset, but he wouldn't let them get by. He was a fierce competitor."

Griskus had prepared an outline for a book called *Odd Man Out*, an autobiography. As he wrote to Bob Glover in 1984, "I honestly believe that my endeavors in this past year, and hopefully in the year to come, are part of a story worth telling." He reflected in his hometown *Waterbury Republican-American* "the accomplishment that makes me the most proud...is the constant training that has made these (race) goals finally attainable. These goals and such attention as I have received are nice, but finish lines are fleeting. Whereas the hard work it takes to reach them is part of my life."

Patrick Griskus is survived by his wife Robin and daughter Laura. Robin, a reading disability teacher, was entered in the 1987 New York City Marathon. Pat, who would have been 40 on November 4, would have been recovering from Ironman and did not plan a serious effort in New York this November. He was scheduled to run the 26.2 miles as a coach, guide, and booster to another disabled runner. It was a gesture consistent with the thoughtful, kindhearted nature of the man.

—Peter Gambaccini