

Scene

Kalisz, Poland

Race of the Painted Birds

Torches and carnations cheer some inspiring competitors

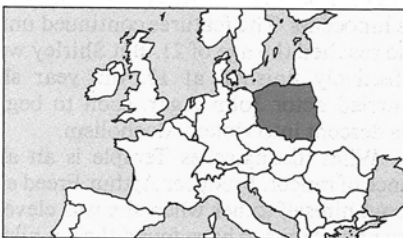
Sparkling through the birches along the lonely dirt road, the Big Dipper let American long-distance runner Dick Traum know he was headed north. Traum, 47, had run only ten miles in the three hours since the starting gun had been fired for the 62-mile Europa Cup Super Marathon in west central Poland. Already his artificial leg had begun to rub bruises into his stump, and his other leg ached. He knew he had 52 miles more to cover in the 22 hours that remained for the completion of the annual Super Marathon in Kalisz (pop. 100,000), a town known for the pianos it manufactures and now for the big race. But he was determined to last the course, because this year for the first time, he and ten other disabled American runners had been specially invited to enter.

The plan for the participation of the Americans had begun to take shape last year. Leszek Sibilski, a former world-class Polish bike racer, was at the New York City Marathon and saw amputee Traum running with other disabled athletes under the banner of the Achilles Track Club. Sibilski had decided to create a similar group in Poland, and a club established in Warsaw soon signed up more than 100 members, a dozen of whom were in the Super Marathon.

The Polish and American disabled, ranging in age from 21 to 75, included blind athletes, amputees and those with cerebral palsy. Some of them began the race ten hours ahead of the 150 able-bodied Polish competitors. The head start was to allow extra time to finish.

Traum, a onetime college wrestler, lost his leg at 24 when a car struck him, and as he moved along on the balmy October evening, he thought of the little dark-haired boy in Jerzy Kosinski's novel *The Painted Bird* who fled from the Holocaust through war-torn Eastern Europe.

Kosinski's symbol for the boy's life is a painted bird who is attacked by other birds because it is different. Each of the disabled runners, Traum thought, was like the painted bird. "We are people who have been attacked and who are different," he said later, "but now we are being treated in a vastly more positive way."



Ready to run: disabled Achilles Club athletes warm up

"How many times in your life can you go beyond what you can do and then be treated with such love?"

Not far down the road, Traum was greeted by peasants playing folk tunes on accordions, trumpets and drums. Village women stood outside their thatched houses, joined by farmers who had left their horse-drawn equipment in the fields to watch the race. For miles, through the long night and the following day, children ran alongside Traum and the other painted birds, cheering on the runners with shouts of "Bravo! Bravo!" here and there tossing red carnations into their path. Young volunteers held flaming torches to guide the runners. Two miles ahead of Traum, in the hamlet of Jankow, Irene Hecht, a blind runner, was offered a

cup of sweet tea by pharmacist Jannina Jasinski. While pouring, Jasinski told two farm children who were watching, "Here's a woman who cannot see, but it doesn't stop her."

Some among the onlookers wondered why anyone, let alone a disabled person, would want to run 62 miles. Explained Jeff Pledger, 31, who is blind: "We disabled always smile when we are asked why we are running such a long distance, and we smile because we recognize the absurdity of it but love the challenge." Others in the crowds by the roadside were moved by the "absurdity." Tears rolled down the face of one young man without hands: If people without legs could run such a race, if polio victim Zbigniew

Wandachowicz could win first place in the wheelchair category, and Kenneth Carnes, an American paraplegic, take second, what vistas might be open for other disabled people?

Hecht's third place overall in the female division as a disabled runner was a special achievement. When she crossed the finish line after 21 hours, she could hardly walk but was delighted by the comment of a young Pole who had been standing at the finish for hours: "We've been waiting for our Irene." At times, Hecht admitted, her feet felt as if they were running on broken glass. "I was crazy, but look at the rewards I got," she says. "How many times in your life can you go beyond what you can do and then be treated with such love?" Said Katia Kubiak, an economist from Warsaw, who stayed awake around the clock to help the disabled: "I felt Irene's pain,

but she showed us what physically disabled women can do." Said Jan Kwiatkowski, a former hurdle runner: "Eleven zealots from the U.S. took to the road and captured the hearts and minds of thousands of Poles, infecting them with their enthusiasm for racing."

For the Poles, all the painted birds—their own and the Americans—were special heroes, whom they adopted for the day, even those who failed to go the distance. Dick Traum finished in 25 hours; even though he was last, he was in plenty of time for the crowd. They burst into the Polish national anthem as he crossed the finish line.

—By Sue Raffety