

ACHILLES CHALLENGE

Equal Abilities For 10K

by Patty Lee Parmalee

The NYRRC's list of inventive races with unique concepts was recently expanded to include the latest successful experiment, The Achilles Handicap, sponsored by the New York Eye and Ear Infirmary on December 4. This 10k, with a handicapped start, was not the first of its kind. Race director Allan Steinfeld ran in a small one himself in 1966. "It was two four-mile loops along the service road adjacent to Major Deegan Highway in the Bronx starting at 161st Street near Yankee Stadium. Thirty-five started, 29 finished, and Joe Kleinerman gave handicaps to each person individually because he knew all of them. It was the only road race I ever won." Amby Burfoot, who came to cover the race for *Runner's World*, has run in a number of small, individually-handicapped races in New England.

The idea in December's larger race, however, was to give every category of runner, including the disabled, an equal chance to cross the finish line first, and to award prizes to the first 100 people to finish. The complex aspect was the calculation of starting times, based on the national records for age, sex, and disability groups, whereas the finish is simplicity itself. There would be no standing around waiting for the results to be tabulated, no separation of people by age groups in the awards ceremony, no special honorable mention for the disabled. Everyone is equal in the end.

After the race, participants showed an appreciation for the concept: "I had a chance to pass the slower runners whom I usually never see, and see how hard they were working"; "It's my first award though I've run in many races"; and, from a disabled runner, "I never felt so much a part of a race before."

This being the first year of a complex experiment, it was also a learning process for the organizers. In the future,

handicapping for the disabled will be more accurate because the times in this year's race can be used as standards; disabled runners whose disabilities do not affect their running will be classified with their able-bodied age groups; more five-year age groups can be instituted; and the race can be held in warm weather, probably April or May of 1990.

In the future, publicity can make clear that the handicap is not only a major race for able-bodied runners but also a chance for them to acquaint themselves with "handicapped" runners on a more social level. For Masters runners, it is a chance to win a race overall, as Ted Haiman, Angella Hearn, and Toshi d'Elia almost did, and 87-year *wunderkind* Al Gordon, a New York Road Runners Club Board member and an honorary CEO at Kidder, Peabody, can claim the distinction of being the oldest finisher in the race. For disabled runners, it did indeed prove to be a time to take top honors, since the first three overall finishers were Achilles members, led by Al Reyes. For everyone, it is an opportunity to see how your age-graded conditioning stacks up against *all* other runners, not just those in your own category. In this race, if you are 50 and finish ahead of your 20-year-old son who always beats you, presumably you are a better runner than he is. Speaking for myself, as an occasional age-group winner, I found the most unusual aspect of running the race to be the sense of being out there alone, motivating myself rather than flowing along with a pack, and getting a chance to see the faster runners who come up from way behind and pass me while I pass the slower runners, rather than seeing the same group of runners who are my speed throughout the entire race. That experience alone makes it a race everyone should run, just because it is different.



Cynthia Sherwin of Chesebrough-Pond's and Steve Piorkowski

For the disabled, the race is a chance to feel more equal than they ever have before and to meet other runners with their disability from around the country and the world. Thanks to grants from corporate sponsors arranged by Dr. Richard Koplín of the New York Eye and Ear Infirmary, approximately 80 disabled runners came from Vermont, Ohio, New Haven, Washington, DC, New Zealand, England, Trinidad and Tobago, and a large group from the Achilles Track Club of Poland, as well as from the Achilles chapters from New York and from the NYC school system and the A. Harry Moore School in New Jersey. The slowest disabled runners started at 8:45 am, while the fastest—open males in wheelchairs, who are faster than the fastest runners—were the "scratch" group, starting at 10 am.

In addition to the 10k race, there was a one-mile race for a dozen young disabled children, who started at the starting line (67th Street and the East Drive in Central Park) and finished at the finish line (near Tavern on the Green), but went around the bottom of the park instead of heading north.

The handicap race itself is only half the story. In addition to sponsoring the race itself, the New York Eye and Ear Infirmary challenged itself and the corporate donors of money to provide free eye examinations and treatment, including surgery, for blind and vision-impaired runners from around the world. Over a dozen surgeons have already donated their services to the program, and Dr. Koplín expects that many more will follow. Add a poster and t-shirt design donated by Peter Max, and awards to top runners presented by Mayor Koch, and you have a unique running event coupled with a worthy cause that should get the attention of the world running community. *LL*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES BOZMAN