



Dennis Yonan / Special to The Courant

Toby Slocum, 19, a senior at Cheshire Academy who has spina bifida, began running two years ago when a chapter of the Achilles Track Club was formed at Gaylord Hospital in Wallingford. He plans to run in the Manchester Road Race Thursday.

RACE TO THE FINISH

Getting there has special meaning for Cheshire Academy student

By LORI RILEY
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CHESHIRE — About eight years ago, Toby Slocum's younger brother wanted to play soccer. Naturally, so did Toby.

"They're not going to let you play soccer on crutches," Toby's mother, Mary Jane Slocum, told him. Toby figured they would.

His crutches were not standard wooden models. They weren't temporary. They were — and still are — aluminum. Toby, a 19-year-old senior at Cheshire Academy, has spina bifida, a birth defect that has rendered his legs useless.

That didn't stop him from approaching Cheshire's recreation director and asking to play. "The guy said, 'Sure,'" Mary Jane Slocum said, laughing. "So Toby played soccer."

He wanted to compete in sports, but sometimes reality — such as his dog Max circling his legs, looking for attention — tripped him up. Other kids got older, faster. Slocum was left out until he became a charter member of the Achilles Track Club in Wallingford two years ago.

Now Slocum runs road races.

Thursday, he will participate in his first Manchester Road Race. He hopes to finish the 4.748-mile course in an hour and a half, at a 15-minute-per-mile pace.

"I hear it's hilly the second mile," Slocum said. "I said on the application, 'If you're not in good condition, do not run this race.'"

No need to worry. If he can run 26.2 miles, as he did at the New York City Marathon three weeks ago, he can get up the hills at Manchester.

It took Slocum 11 hours, 54 seconds — with a few stops along the way — to complete his first marathon. He ran with an able-bodied guide and friend, Chris Lammano.

"At the 10th mile, I felt like I ran a mile," said Slocum, whose longest race prior to New York was the New Haven 20K (12.4 miles). "I felt great. I stopped and talked to a few kids on the side of the road and then we just took off again."

After 17 miles, he stopped to take off his shoes. He expected to see blood — sometimes his toenails rub against his running shoes — but there was none. "I just thought, 'I don't care if I crawl to the finish line, I'm going to finish.'"

When he did, it was about 5 p.m. Runners were still streaming across the Central Park

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finish line, but the TV camera crews and many spectators had left. Slocum said he still felt great.

"I was wired," he said. "I didn't know what to do next."

What else could he do after that?

Slocum took his first steps at age 3, with the help of miniature crutches and braces that held his legs upright. He remembers being in and out of the hospital as a child. "I had my spine fused when I was 7," he said. Without the operation, his undeveloped spinal column would have curved and not allowed him to bear his torso weight.

Physical therapy started when he was 3 months old and continued into his early teens at Gaylord Rehabilitation Hospital in Wallingford. He has always enjoyed sports, following the Yankees, then the Red Sox. He still collects baseball cards. Upon entering Cheshire Academy in fifth grade, he took a liking to lacrosse. He managed the varsity team for five years. He owned seven lacrosse sticks.

Although his two younger brothers are active in football and lacrosse, he wasn't particularly frustrated by not being able to play.

But suddenly, it was his turn to participate. He joined Gaylord's newly-formed chapter of the Achilles Track Club, an international organization for disabled runners. Slocum was enthralled. He remained so until his first workout

distances slowly and needed prodding from coaches at times.

"Sometimes Toby's training isn't as diligent as we would like it to be," said Slocum's former physical therapist, Nelson Carvalho, who coaches the club. "But he's so mentally tough, he's able to do these things. For New York, he said he did most of his training in his mind."

Slocum's first race was a half-mile run around Yale Bowl in December 1988. Gradually, he moved up to 5-mile and 10K distances. In July, he ran the Southington 12K Distance Classic.

"The first two miles, I didn't want to do it," he said. "I had a sick stomach and the whole bit. But then I was OK."

That day, the timers were starting to pack up their equipment when Slocum appeared with his guide, an hour and a half after the winner. The clock flashed 1 hour, 11 minutes. He had run a 12-kilometer race in his best 10K time. He was elated.

In the summer, Slocum ran 2½ miles daily. But with homework and a desire to attend Mitchell College in New London next year, he runs only on weekends now. He usually competes in a race.

He tuned up for Manchester Sunday at a 5-miler in Wallingford and said he felt pretty good Monday. Thanksgiving will be his next test. He may finish last again, but he doesn't care.

"That doesn't matter at all," he said. "At