

BY GEORGE: One would think George Foreman would be the last person to be critical of anyone's weight. One would be wrong. George went on about Riddick Bowe's tonnage during HBO's replay of title fight. **Raissan, Page 92**

A WINNING SPIRIT

Last-place marathoner has places in the heart

YESTERDAY morning in Central Park, about five minutes before 10 and about 21 hours after Andres Espinosa, Zoe Koplowitz crossed the finish line with two canes and brought another New York City Marathon to a close. It was her sixth straight last-place finish. Her time was 27 hours, 45 minutes. She started at 6:10 a.m. on Sunday with other Achilles Track Club competitors and ended hours later than usual, having been done in by the heat, same as everyone else.

The late arrival had its ad-



WINNING SMILE: Zoe Koplowitz at the finish line of the New York City Marathon.

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WAYNE COFFEY



vantages. "I never saw the finish line before. Usually I get there in total darkness," she said. "This entire day was a gift, one tremendous gift."

One of the first to greet her was Grete Waitz, nine-time NYC Marathon winner. They had met at a dinner several nights earlier. Waitz was so moved by Koplowitz' spirit, by her refusal to let multiple sclerosis shut her in, that she told Koplowitz she wanted to be there at the finish, no matter the hour. And she was right there yesterday, draping a race medal around Koplowitz' neck. Waitz told her how proud she was of her and Koplowitz thanked her for being there. They both cried.

"She is an amazing woman," Waitz said Sunday night. Zoe Koplowitz is 45 and lives on the Lower East Side. She is co-owner of a trucking company. She has had MS for almost 20 years. Her fight back against the disease began in earnest on Jan. 8, 1988, when she nearly choked to death on a Vitamin C pill, and was so fed up with feeling frail and helpless that she resolved to conquer the most

outrageous physical challenge she could think of. Soon after she began training for the marathon.

About seven miles into the race Sunday, along 4th Ave. in Brooklyn, Koplowitz saw a friend she had made at the same spot two years earlier. The woman was with her 2-year-old daughter, Meena. Koplowitz doesn't even know the mother's name, but will never forget that first meeting, when Meena was an infant and Koplowitz saw the mother holding a sign encouraging Achilles runners. Koplowitz asked her, "Who do you know in Achilles?" The mother pointed to her baby. When Koplowitz saw the disabled little girl again

yesterday, she told the mother, "I'm dedicating this race to Meena."

This was some 27-hour journey Koplowitz had. She wore black spandex, a gold scarf and a cape with a turtle on the back and the words, "I'm not Grete." She made her annual visit to a sports bar in Long Island City, to go to the bathroom. "It's like you expect Norm or somebody from Cheers to be in there," she said. She doesn't know the name of the place.

It took her an hour to get over the Queensborough Bridge, because they had picked up the carpet and her canes were close to slipping through the grating. She had dinner, soup and a bagel, at

Cafe 79 on 79th and First Ave. in Manhattan, and then her friends from the Guardian Angels, who have accompanied her for the nighttime hours the last four years, escorted her uptown, into the Bronx, and back into Manhattan.

A few years ago Koplowitz was confronted by a guy with a gun. When he saw her running number, he waved her on. This year, the only real excitement was when they stopped for coffee in Harlem. The Angels' van pulled up. "There must've been a drug buy going on and they thought it was a bust, because beepers started going off all over the place," Koplowitz said. Friends have tried to

talk her out of walking the city in the middle of the night. They haven't gotten far. Race organizers have said they want to put a 15-hour limit on the race, citing safety concerns. Koplowitz thinks that's a horrendous idea. It will discourage disabled athletes from competing. Her attitude is: This is our marathon. These are our streets. She is going to be out there, no matter what. "I can run around my living room 5,000 times and call it a marathon," she said. "If I can't be out there where the pack was, why do it at all?"

By the time Koplowitz made her way onto Central Park South early yesterday, she had all kinds of unexpected company. She passed a group of elite French runners, who sang "La Marseillaise" to her. By the Plaza, Mexican runners greeted her and went off and got roses from somewhere, and they gave them to her, along with kisses. As she neared the finish line, there was a whole entourage, maybe three dozen runners, from all over the world, saluting her and encouraging her.

Zoe Koplowitz thought of the kids she has met in schools the last few weeks, part of a program sponsored by Chemical Bank called The Achilles Ambassadors. She talked to them about overcoming obstacles and setting goals, and got some lovely thank-yous, especially from Ann Larson's class at IS 44 on the Upper West Side. A student named Kouri-Asward Flye wrote, "I hope they find a cure for MS. Good luck in your marathon."

KOPLOWITZ tells whomever will listen that disabled people have the same needs and wants and feelings as everybody else. They just move at a different pace, that's all.

Hours after her teary finish-line meeting with Waitz, Zoe Koplowitz still couldn't sleep. She said, "My endorphins are screaming." Later on, she would try again. She would go into her bedroom and lie down, right underneath a poster that says, "The race belongs not only to the swift, but to those who keep on running."

'This entire day was a gift, one tremendous gift.'