

AMERICAN

Volume 8 No. 1 April 1994

QUARTERLY

BOOK REVIEWS

A VICTORY FOR HUMANITY
by Dick Traum and Mike Celizic
WRS Publishing
Waco, Texas
230 pages, hardback \$19.95
Reviewer: Ruth Cunningham

A year ago I attended a meeting of the American Medical Athletic Association and heard an inspiring talk by Dr. Dick Traum. "Running," he said, "is not just good for the able-bodied, but for the disabled as well."

Sometime later, I was handed a book, *A Victory for Humanity*, by this same speaker, who is the founder and spark plug behind the Achilles Track Club, a running club specifically for the disabled.

The disabled, he is quick to point out, not the handicapped. For these runners, now over 3,000 strong in clubs covering the United States and many foreign countries, are accomplishing feats that most of us with all of our facilities are not doing. Several times a year, somewhere in the world, athletes confined to wheelchairs or coping with amputations, blindness, autism, multiple sclerosis, recovering from severe brain injuries and strokes, are competing in 5Ks, 10ks, half-marathons and even marathons.

For these dedicated people, the roar of the crowd and the applause they receive at the end of a difficult race is something some of them have never experienced and something they will never forget.

Dick Traum does not write about these events from mere observation. At 24, a freak accident meant his right leg had to be amputated above the knee. Though he spent eight

months in hospitals and rehabilitation centers, often in days blurred with pain, he never gave up. His greatest drive upon his release was to become independent.

And this drive forced him to go beyond many of the limits that tend to work against those with disabilities. Along the way he had acquired an artificial leg that gave him greater mobility and independence, a doctoral degree, and his wife, Betsy, a nurse he had met during his rehabilitation.

In 1975, after setting up and prospering in his own business, Personnelmetrics, Inc., the early death by heart attack of a colleague motivated him to evaluate his own life, virtually void of daily exercise. As a result, and with encouragement from another colleague, he enrolled in a class at a local YMCA. This led to later association with the New York Road Runners Club and Fred Lebow, the instigator of the New York City Marathons, a warm relationship that continues today with Lebow being one of Achilles' board members.

Although in the beginning, Traum was only able to run for three minutes without stopping, with much perseverance, his time continued to lengthen until he was participating in a 3K, then a 5K and 10K, then a half-marathon.

In the fall of 1976, Dick became the first amputee to run the New York City Marathon. Finishing the race, he says, "had to be one of the most exciting moments of my life." This was an astounding feat, and excited not only those with disabilities, but others.

In a New York Daily article, the next day, a spectator was quoted: "It says our troubles aren't so great. If he has enough stamina to do that, we have enough stamina to do what we have to do."

For the next several years, Traum was a diligent working member of the board of the New York Road Runners Club. As such, after they outgrew their old quarters, he was instrumental in helping the NYRRRC locate and find

funding for a building they bought on East 89th Street. Having their own headquarters, they became respected members of the corporate community who, in turn, have become sponsors of their many successful and growing programs.

Never one to be idle, Dick searched for a new project and challenge. He knew what setting exercise and running goals had done for him. Helping other disabled people to realize the benefits he was enjoying prompted him to begin an eight-week series of running classes. Writing to doctors and other medical professionals who might have disabled patients, he encouraged amputees and people in wheelchairs to respond.

Though at first only two people showed up, it was deemed a success, and the start of what has grown to be a magnificent array of men and women who overcame tremendous odds to compete alongside those whom we call able-bodied. But to reach the goals these truly great people have is, to me, to receive the laurel wreath reserved for the greatest heroes of the ancient world.

As one who had had little association with disabled people other than himself—and he didn't really consider himself disabled—Traum soon realized he was ignorant of many other kinds of disabilities.

For example, an early member had suffered a stroke that had partially paralyzed one side of her body, but in just walking, she looked fine. When Dick asked her to help him move a heavy table, she told him she couldn't because she had had a stroke. Another night a new blind runner came. Thinking he was a volunteer (one who runs with every disabled participant), Dick directed him to run with someone in a wheelchair. Asking if he should hold on to the chair, he was told that wasn't necessary, just to run next to it. "But I can't see," was the reply, "I'm blind." Traum confesses he made that mistake, along with many others, with some frequency at first.

He also learned there was a whole world of disabilities he had never imagined. And those stories, along with many, many others, fill the pages of the rest of the book. Stories that are incredible in their relating, astounding in the heights these remarkable people have reached.

This book is one that will thrill you, and excite you, and encourage you. It will make you want to get out of your easy chair and walk that extra mile, or swim those extra lengths, or maybe even volunteer to be an aide at the next Achilles track meet, for now these clubs are found everywhere.

Beginning with chapters in other states, they soon spread to New Zealand, Trinidad and then Poland. There are now chapters in Russia, China and Mongolia, even among the Nantes Indians, 100 miles inside the Arctic Circle.

And after doing a 62-miler in Kalish, Poland in 1988, you can't say Dick Traum does not get around. Along with setting up more clubs in these areas, the Achilles group brings many of these participants to run in races held in the United States. Following the exhilarating finish, a number of them find themselves the proud possessors of new, improved prosthetic limbs, wheelchairs, and even surgical procedures to alleviate, or possibly heal their disabilities, courtesy of volunteer donors who wish to do their part in this great effort.

For the disabled, for all of us, this story inspires to do things we may have only heretofore dreamed of doing.

I would like to relate to you all of these uplifting stories, but well, you will just have to read them for yourself. I guarantee you will not come out of the experience untouched. My hat is off to Dick Traum, and the many, many people who have conspired to enrich and fulfill the lives of these courageous athletes who have scaled mountains we, the able-bodied, are too blind to see.

(Ed. note: Ruth Cunningham is the widow of Glenn Cunningham. In the 30's, he was world record holder in several track events. As a young boy, his legs were burned so severely, doctors had predicted he would never walk again.)