

Between Races: Handicapped Rights

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LOBNYA, Moscow Region — Traditionally, in wheelchair racing, a competitor who crosses the finish line does not leave the finish area. Instead, the athlete cheers on others making the last effort.

Tatyana Tarasova, the most decorated female wheelchair athlete in Rus-

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sia, and winner of the 1994 New York City Marathon, usually has plenty of time to cheer because she is often the first one at the finish line.

Tarasova has won almost every race on the national level during her illustrious career. From 1990 to 1992 she was the all-round champion of the former Soviet Union and the Commonwealth of Independent States, winning every distance from 100 meters to 5 kilometers. She has also helped a number of other handicapped athletes along the way.

Six years ago, Tarasova herself was a newcomer and a pioneer in the sport of wheelchair racing.

"In 1989, when wheelchair racing started in the Soviet Union, there were just two of us female athletes." Now there are about 20 women regularly participating in the sport, ranging from their 20s to their mid-50s.

Tarasova was sent to Seattle, Washington, to compete in the 1990 Goodwill Games for the U.S.S.R. "I was a rookie then and didn't know much about racing," said Tarasova with a smile on her face. "I finished dead last, and my wheelchair weighed a ton. Nevertheless, when I was coming to the end of my 1,500 meters, the entire stadium gave me a standing ovation."

Six years later, she can afford to laugh about those days. A seasoned veteran, Tarasova is enjoying her finest season ever. She is a member of the Achilles Track Club and is undefeated this year, thanks in part to a new Shadow, an American-made wheelchair which was presented to her as a prize for winning the N.Y.C. Marathon in a course record of two hours, 57 minutes, 12 seconds.

Tarasova is also a pioneer when it comes to fighting for the rights of handicapped people in this country. She is used to difficult conditions in her life, since a freak fall on a stairway 17 years ago left her paralyzed from the waist down. She says the day-to-day struggle with such simple things as climbing stairs in her building or getting on and off sidewalks without ramps is a lot tougher than any race she has entered. For ex-



Wheelchair athlete Tatyana Tarasova, readying to deal with a daily obstacle. Unlike life, "In racing, you know the rules," she says.

ample, she lives in a building, like many others in Russia, where there is a flight of stairs but no wheelchair ramp between the front door and the elevator.

"In sports, in racing, you know the rules, you know your main competition," says Tarasova, "and it is up to you to do something. In life, often, we have to depend on others, and in Russia, others usually don't have time for us."

Even a brand-new wheelchair doesn't help with a simple thing like seeing a doctor at the local clinic, when she has to navigate streets full of potholes and sidewalks covered with broken glass. A 10-minute walk to the clinic takes Tarasova half an hour. Often she cannot navigate the curbs and needs to travel in traffic.

An auto-accident cost Tarasova's friend Nadezhda Smirnova her life. Smirnova, another pioneer wheelchair athlete, then only 26, was killed when a truck hit her during training on a busy Moscow street two years ago. Tarasova says she has that accident at the back of her mind every time she takes to the road.

Tarasova, 37, shares a two-room apartment with her mother in Lobnya, a 64,000-population Moscow suburb near Sheremetyevo Airport. Still, for the most part she has to depend on her-

self in life and in sports. While Tarasova's mother does shopping for her, she is accustomed of doing most of her own chores.

Her six-day-a-week training schedule helps Tarasova get away from tedious daily existence. Moscow's Achilles Club, which has some 50 members with problems ranging from paralysis to blindness to multiple sclerosis, provides Tarasova with transport to and from racing events.

In summer, Tarasova can often be seen logging her miles on a nearby busy highway. During long Russian winters, she is bound to her 10-meter flat in Lobnya. She spends her time working on a treadmill, lifting home-made weights for upper-body strength and watching lots of television.

"I can only envy those who can train in Central Park all year round," says Tarasova, referring to the week she spent in New York before the marathon last year.

The Achilles movement, which was founded by American Richard Traum in 1982, has over 50 chapters in more than 20 countries around the world where disabled athletes take part in various track events from short distances to running marathons.

Tarasova's last race in 95-3

nia, in early June, brought together all the top female wheelchair athletes of the former Soviet Union. She went head-to-head with her arch-rivals, Ukrainian champion Svetlana Trifonova and Lithuania's No. 1 racer, Irena Permichute.

The weather was hotter than 30 degrees Celsius: That and a treacherous course around the Old City with a steep hill near the finish made it difficult for all the competitors. Front-runner Trifonova had to drop out after five kilometers, a victim to her own high tempo, while others had to slow down to stay the course. Tarasova used her trademark finish to pull away on a steep hill and never looked back.

"This victory is much more satisfying because it was achieved under difficult conditions with tough competitors," said the winner.

Tarasova's efforts to get help for handicapped people are starting to pay off.

She is making the most of her popularity in Lobnya, where she is not only the most famous athlete, but the only top athlete in town. City officials have recognized her. The head of the city administration, Leonid Barashkov, donated his own money for Tarasova's trip to the United States last year.