



Pumped to Run With Running Pump

By DAVID WALLIS

Potential competitors beware.

For a highly specialized category of runners in tomorrow's New York City Marathon, Robert Skaretka has issued a challenge:

"I don't think there are any other heart-transplant recipients running Sunday, but if there is, I'm winning," he said.

The 46-year-old Skaretka will be participating in his fourth New York City Marathon since getting a new heart in April 1991.

"I run to prove that a transplant works," said the resident of Forest Hills, Queens. Actually, he confines his pace to a brisk walk because the side effects from a drug he takes to combat organ rejection rob his bones of calcium. His hips might suffer from the repetitive pounding of long-distance running.

Still, he occasionally sprints — when he hears the blast from the starter's gun and again before reaching the finish line.

"The finish line is like an oasis, when I get close to it, the adrenaline just pumps," he said. "It feels great to run like I used to."

A trim 6-footer, Skaretka had run five New York City marathons (with a best time of 4 hours 23 minutes) before his cardiomyopathy was diagnosed. It is a disease in which the heart muscles cannot pump properly.

Although he knew he had an abnormal heart — an electrocardiogram administered by Nynex, where Skaretka works as a technician, revealed he had an enlarged heart in 1976 — he didn't feel the effects until a 1990 marathon tuneup held in Central Park. After traversing "Heartbreak Hill," Skaretka experienced shortness of breath, coughing and chest pains.

"I was having congestive heart failure and didn't even know it," he said.

He struggled through the marathon that November and put off visiting a cardiologist until late January 1991, when his coughing intensified.

Soon he was hospitalized and placed on the waiting list for a new heart. His condition deteriorated, but a little more than three months after his diagnosis he got a new heart. According to the United Network for Organ Sharing, the median time a heart patient waited for a donation last year was about twice that, 208 days.

"Ever since the transplant, I've been floating on

cloud nine," Skaretka said. "My pulse is good, and I can breathe without problems. It's been such a drastic change."

After a brief convalescence, Skaretka was encouraged by his doctors to start working out.

"Exercise is an important component of recovery," said Dr. Ronald Drusin, Skaretka's cardiologist. Shuffling a few steps in a hospital gown quickly turned into marching a few miles in jogging shorts. But Skaretka longed for competition and trained until he returned to the marathon's starting line in 1992.

His return left him more dispirited than invigorated.

"In the beginning of the race I was surrounded by 26,000 people, but after I got halfway through, most of the runners had finished. Then, I saw street sweepers cleaning the street and was forced to walk on the sidewalk. By the time I reached the finish line, it was dark. That was depressing."

But not enough to stop him from trying again. He looks like any other runner, except for a black wristwatch that doubles as a pulse monitor and a white jersey with "Heart Transplant" emblazoned across his chest. The scar down his sternum, which he proudly shows off, has faded. And he is preoccupied with breaking his own post-operative record of 6:23. He adds, "I don't feel 46."

Cheering on Skaretka will be Terrance and Cathy Ryan of Centereach, L.I. The Ryans' 16-year-old son, Terrance Jr., who committed suicide, was the donor of Skaretka's heart. Although social workers don't encourage face-to-face contact between a donor's family and recipients, coincidence brought the families together.

The Lutheran minister planning Terrance Jr.'s funeral sought assistance from a colleague, who happened to be a distant relative of Skaretka's. The two ministers arranged for the families to meet.

"He is a part of our family now," said Cathy Ryan. "Bob is a very fortunate man to have Terry's heart because he was such a great kid. But Terrance's heart couldn't be in a better place."

Skaretka will run in the marathon with the Achilles Track Club. Some of its members will start the race three hours before the rest of the pack.

"When the bell goes off, I run across the Verrazano Bridge," Skaretka said. "For a minute or two, I'm the leader of the New York City Marathon."