



FEATURES

Sporting chance for disabled

A New York-based track club is hoping to help Hong Kong's handicapped people enjoy and compete in sports, writes **Linda Yeung**

ONCE a keen runner, Chris Stewart now devotes his time to encouraging more people, particularly the disabled, to take part in the annual New York Marathon. The blind, even those on crutches or in wheelchairs can now join in, he says.

An international volunteer for the New York-based Achilles Track Club (ATC), Stewart was recently in Hong Kong on the last leg of his Southeast Asian trip to find out what his club can do for disabled athletes in this region.

"I'm worried that in Hong Kong, a money-oriented place, no one will have the luxury or time to think about the disabled," he said. However, he had no time to conduct any research into his misgivings during his brief stay here, except for meeting representatives of the Hong Kong Sports Association for the Physically Disabled. He had in mind a local athlete whom he wanted to invite to the New York Marathon.

The athlete is 27-year-old Wong Chi-keung, winner of the Hanoi 10-kilometre wheelchair race held in January. Mr Wong has been a winner for two consecutive years.

A Cambodian wheelchair athlete who lost both his legs to hidden mines is another on Mr Stewart's list.

"There are also three from Kobe, Japan, that I hope to bring to New York," he said.

"One of them was handicapped by the recent earthquake there. We also hope that our branch in Osaka will organise a long-distance running event for Asians in the future."

Mr Stewart will also seek sponsors for not only Mr Wong's trip to New York later this year, but for the other disabled Asian athletes.

"To be able to participate in an able-bodied event will have a positive psychological effect on them; it's the feeling that they are being treated the same," he said.

"It does not matter if they win or not; 99 per cent of the participants will not win anyway. Some won't even finish the race."

Around 30,000 people take part in

the marathon every year, of whom about 1,000 are disabled. Wheelchair athletes have been allowed in the event since 1977. Mr Stewart, 48, is an accomplished runner himself, finishing in third place in both 1976 and 1977. Three years ago, he joined ATC - which has branches across 30 countries including Japan, Vietnam, Mongolia, Russia and Norway - to encourage the participation of disabled people in running events.

Despite its international network, ATC has only three paid staff, who are based in New York. Mr Stewart, who used to run a coin business, had to dip into his own pocket to cover the expenses of his three-month Asian trip. Through contacts with local sports officials and associations, the charitable organisation is seeking to get more countries to provide similar sports opportunities for their disabled population.

ATC itself is open to all people who enjoy running, regardless of their disabilities, whether they be paraplegics, or suffer from arthritis, epilepsy, cancer or other ailments. Membership is free and includes the provision of coaching and workouts for various races.

The ATC's founder, for instance, had one of his legs amputated following an accident.

Being on the road most of his time, Mr Stewart cherishes ATC's goal of involving disabled athletes in mainstream events. "We are providing an example of what can be done for these athletes," he said. "I think Asians are responsive to ideas."

In Hong Kong, sport is still an exclusive term to most of the disabled. Stephen Lee Kai-mou, executive secretary of the Hong Kong Sports Association for the Physically Disabled, is less than pleased with the level of support they get.

"Very few disabled persons even do sports for recreation," he said. "There is insufficient transportation around to take them to the sports venues. But engaging in sports activities is a good way for them to increase their social contacts."

"Some parents and special schools don't encourage disabled youngsters to do sports either. They



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Running mate... 'we are providing an example of what can be done for these athletes', says Chris Stewart of the work being done for the disabled by the Achilles Track Club. Photograph: Jon Hargess

are either too worried about their safety or held back by the inconvenience of taking them to sports venues."

Local athletes, however, have taken part in a host of sports events in the international arena, and achieved results. Two blind lawn-bowlers from the territory won a team bronze medal in the handicapped people's category in last year's Commonwealth Games.

Basketball, archery, fencing, and tennis are among the sports practised by local wheelchair athletes, while the blind swim and spastics play bocce, a sport similar to lawn-bowling.

"Any prize-winning by disabled

athletes is generally given little coverage in the local media," Mr Lee said. "There is still a certain level of discrimination against disabled people."

Mr Wong, the territory's leading disabled athlete and a data-processing worker employed by the Hong Kong Sports Institute, said many disabled people, even if they were talented, preferred to stay home or concentrate on their work rather than play sport. "Transportation is a major hurdle," he said, while pointing to the need to create more sports opportunities by, for example, encouraging the wheelchair-bound to take up new challenges, such as swimming or diving.

According to Mr Stewart, there are even blind skiers in New Zealand.

Mr Wong has not been to any local races involving able-bodied counterparts for the past three years. A previously annual "open-to-all" marathon organised by the Hong Kong Amateur Athletics Association has been scrapped because of heavy traffic on the Tolo Highway, where it was staged. He did enjoy his opportunities in the past, however. "It's great being in the same group with others."

As far as his invitation to go to New York is concerned, Wong is right to the point: "I'll consider it if I don't have to pay."