

Sunday, October 20, 1996



Members of the Achilles Track Club run together at Harrybrook Park in New Milford. From left to right are Patrick Delzell and Yakima Sandoval of Danbury, Tami Lee of New Milford, April Nolan of Danbury, Noel Cabrera and Rick Asselta of Danbury. The News-Times/Carol Kaliff

## Achilles club members get up and go

By Robert Miller  
THE NEWS-TIMES

It's too cold, too hot, too something. There's that fascinating piece on the making of "Baywatch" to be read. And Julia Child is making crepes again.

### Exercise

For most people, the excuses for not running — for not even taking a walk — are myriad, detailed and flimsy.

People with serious illnesses or disabilities, on the other hand, can say with some legitimacy, "I can't." So when George Barilla of Ridgefield — who has suffered all his life from a traumatic brain injury —

takes to the road, it means something more than just a workout.

"In Brooklyn, I saw people running," Barilla, 52, said. "I tried and at first I couldn't. I had to start by walking."

"He fell down," wife Jean said. "But the more he ran, the less often he fell."

Barilla is one of the founding members of the Achilles Track Club of Western Connecticut. The club is committed to helping people with any physical disabilities or chronic illnesses get out and run, walk, hop or wheel. While its members often participate in the area's scheduled road races, its mission is just to get people

out and moving at their own pace.

"This is for anyone," said Tami Lee of New Milford, who has multiple sclerosis.

"It's about locomotion," said Pat Delzell of Danbury, one of the volunteers who runs with club members.

The first Achilles Track Club was founded in 1983 by Dick Traum, a New York businessman, who in 1976 was the first amputee to finish the New York City Marathon. There are now 40 Achilles chapters in the United States, and 115 worldwide, Traum said.

"There are 15 in the former Soviet Union and seven in Bulgaria," Traum

said. "It's very easy to get them started in Third World countries. There are fewer opportunities for the disabled in those countries. And when you come in with something different there, it really catches on."

The clubs encourage anyone with a serious illness or disability to participate. Their members include paraplegics, amputees, the blind, and people with cerebral palsy, angina pectoris, heart transplants, polio, cancer, autism and scores of other illnesses.

The Western Connecticut chapter was

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started by Rick Asselta, a teacher at the Danbury Alternative Center for Education who had his cancerous esophagus removed in 1992. After the operation, Asselta, now 53, began running to help himself recover both physically and emotionally and became hooked on the sport.

"I rarely see Rick in a T-shirt without words on it," said his wife, Nelly, laughing at her event-lad husband. "Someday, I would like to see him in something that doesn't have advertising on the front and the back."

Through area runners, Asselta inked up with members of the Cancer Support Group of the New York Road Runners Club, and ran his first New York City Marathon in 1993.

There, he heard of Traum and the Achilles Club; rather than commute, he decided to start a chapter here. The club now has about 30 members, with a core of about six regulars. It also has the Achilles Kids — students at the Alternative School who volunteer to help

"It helped the kids a lot," Asselta said. "It helps them overcome a lot of the emotional hardships they have to face. They come away from helping people with a different attitude."

Many of the members learned about the club from Asselta.

Tami Lee took a more circuitous route. After being diagnosed in 1995 with multiple sclerosis — a degenerative nerve disease — Lee read Traum's book "A Victory For Humanity." She called the Achilles Club in New York City and learned there was a chapter down the road.

"After I was diagnosed, I thought I can't run. I can't do anything," said Lee, 41, who suffers from fatigue and from vision and balance problems because of MS. "But it really helps me mentally. Sometimes, I go out and run and feel energized. Sometimes, I can't quite do it. But I never joined any MS support group. This fills the gap for me. There are so many different people with so many different challenges."

"There a lot of camaraderie that comes from the sweat and pain," Asselta said. "You say things on the road you wouldn't ordinarily say."

Because the club's members are scattered throughout the region, it's hard for it to center its activities in one spot. Instead, its members float.

Sometimes, the group runs with the Wolf Pit Track Club in Ridgefield. It's also held regular meetings at Harrybrook Park in New Milford, and club members participate in the area road races.

"Every time I run, there are people yelling 'Go, Achilles, six, Achilles,'" Delzell, 34, said. "They know the club and it gets the biggest cheers of anyone."

The club has also been helped by Duracell Inc., which gave it a \$1,200 grant, and the Northeast Track & Trail Running Gear store in Danbury, which donated the club's jerseys and some of its running gear.

"It's a good club," said John Dunn, one of the store's owners. "It just makes you feel good."

The club is always on the lookout for more members, whether they be cancer patients or people with physical disabilities. With more members, Asselta said, it can schedule more regular activities and further spread its basic message: Do the most you can.

"When you get a chronic illness, you go through this whole change," Lee said. "Your personality changes — you're not the same person you used to be. This helped save me."

To join the Western Connecticut chapter of the Achilles Track Club, call Rick Asselta at (203) 750-9090, home, or (203) 797-4762, work; Tami Lee at (860) 353-4961, or George Barilla at (203) 435-1053.