

Achilles Kids Get Around

by Sara Holbrook

A stockpile of red and blue Reebok shoe boxes reaches to the ceiling at the Achilles Track Club offices. Though the pile is substantial, the component parts are small: child-sized boxes, for little feet.

Accumulated rubber sends a distinct odor wafting through Achilles headquarters, but most people probably do not notice the new sneaker smell. These particular Reeboks, however, do attract a lot of attention. They are the tangible reward for kids finishing the "Race Around New York" program.

Participants in Race Around New York are Achilles Kids, disabled youth who work out at least once a week under the guidance of a corps of volunteers. They log miles that will add up to the approximate distance around Manhattan. Instructors keep track of the distances the children cover, and mark off their progress on a map that charts a 26.2-mile course around the island.

Achilles Kids move any way they can—running, walking, wheeling. When they finish the Manhattan "marathon" (no matter how long it takes), they earn a precious pair of Reeboks. "To see these kids when they get their shoes, it is really something. They just light up," says Dick Traum, president of Achilles and Board member of the New York Road Runners Club. "For many, it is the nicest pair of shoes they have ever had."

Nine-year-old Jonathan Cruz is a regular at Achilles Kids workouts. Cerebral Palsy hinders his walking, but not his enthusiasm. In the spring, his mother makes sure they arrive at Central Park from the Bronx in time for the 9 AM workouts.



Achilles Kids, accompanied by siblings and friends, show they're ready for action at a New York Road Runners Club peewee race.

After a few hasty stretches, Jonathan takes off around the pond (just north of 72nd Street on the East Side) at a determined clip, leading his mother by the hand. Animated discussions of his favorite sports team, the Chicago Bulls, keep him moving quickly. By the end of the session, Jonathan has finished two miles.

The inevitable explanation for this Jordan-esque display of determination? It's the shoes. "A lot of these kids show up and they can not run 20 yards without stopping," asserts Les Winter, chief operating officer of Achilles. "By the end of the program, some can run more than a mile."

Because of a sizable grant from the Heckscher Foundation, Achilles has been able to focus its efforts on inner city youth with disabilities. "We've made 1996 the Year of the Kids," declares Traum. "Because if you live in a low-income neighborhood and are disabled, in many ways you're at a double disadvantage." Traum and his volunteers are dedicated to a running program for Achilles Kids, and adults, because it is healthy, accessible, inexpensive, and breaks down barriers.

A personalized journey around New

York is only one activity of the Achilles Kids. There is a similar running program for blind children, with membership cards in Braille. Throughout the summer there will be outdoor workouts in Central Park, participation in the Junior Road Race Series and peewee events at NYRRC races, and family trips. Teenagers who will be 18 by November 3 are training for the 1996 New York City Marathon. These myriad projects have de-

veloped into a cooperative effort with volunteers, schools, and caregivers. "It is not just the parents," says Traum. "You'll see a grandmother come run with her grandchild."

Winter maintains that the health benefits of Achilles Kids activities are emotional as well as physical. "It is an incredible boost to their self-esteem for them to see what they can accomplish. The whole thing is what I call an 'elegant program.' It is efficient—at very little cost to the individual schools—with wide-reaching effects."

Additionally, Achilles makes an effort to reach the siblings and friends of disabled child athletes. In order to "mainstream" and accomplish the "breaking down barriers" part of the mission, able-bodied kids are recruited to act as guides in races. Achilles adults speak in schools about what it is like to be disabled, and they hand out baseball trading cards, sponsored by Chase Manhattan Bank, that feature Achilles athletes with their lifetime statistics.

The lesson to all kids, says Traum, is that "disabled does not mean frail" and "a disability does not have to be a handicap."