

## Marathon Marcia 'Never Walks Alone'

BY LINCOLN ANDERSON

Marcia Monaco's disability is not as readily apparent as those of other handicapped participants in the New York City marathon. She has arthritis.

While others her age and with her condition are on the couch watching the race on television, Monaco, aged 64, last Sunday completed her eighth 26-miler. Disbelieving friends ask, when is she going to give it up already?

"That's what they all say," Monaco said. "Most people say you're crazy. I guess because they say that, that's why I do it."

### No Achilles Heels

Monaco, a resident of West 81st Street, is a member of the Achilles Track Club, an organization for disabled runners founded in 1983, claiming 225 members in 30 countries.

Certainly, she's not the most disabled of the group, by far, some of whom are blind or have cerebral palsy. In fact, she originally joined Achilles because she wanted a volunteer walking with her for protection against muggers.

Breaking the finish line in around eight hours, she isn't setting any speed records. In '95, she finished 26,690 out of 27,634. "As long as I get there, I get there," she said.

Yet, with osteoarthritis in her arms, legs, back and hips, getting there is no walk in the park. "It gets painful at around 15 miles," she said. But, she added, "it's not excruciating pain." For mere mortals, it's hard to know, though. She says she suffers from arthritis so bad she cannot sleep on her left side.

The day before the marathon, Monica was matched with a volunteer who would walk beside her during the race and carry the cane. Monica borrowed from a neighbor for the first time - just in case.

"The first five miles are hard," she said. "After that, the bones get oiled up.

"I will not *not* finish," she

vowed. "That's not a choice. I'll say, 'OK, my toes hurt, my foot hurts, but then I'll turn around and look at some of the amputees - they are truly role models."

She'll stop to massage her feet if she needs to. In the marathon two years ago, she stopped at a McDonald's and soaked her feet in the bathroom sink.

To help keep her moving, she listens to music on headphones - her late husband's songs that he once sang, Streisand, Sinatra. A favorite is her husband's rendition of "You'll Never Walk Alone."

Since she started marathoning eight years ago, she has taken to walking to work each day to her jewelry designing business on 47th Street. At a brisk pace. "I can't stroll. I can't browse," she said.

Marcia has tried acupuncture and even steroids for her arthritis, but has had best results from stretching, walking and yearly visits to the healing mud baths at Ischia, Italy.

This year, for the first time, her doctor advised her against the



The inspirational portrait of West Sider Marcia Monaco

John Whittaker

long-distance event. "The doctor says my knees are getting worn down. I may have to cut back to half-marathons," she said.

Sixty-eight percent of women over 65 have osteoarthritis. Advanced osteoarthritis can relegate

its victims to a wheelchair or bed, and cause terrible pain. Rheumatoid arthritis is more rare. Both forms can go into remission.

Exercise can be good and bad

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for arthritis, said Dr. Igor Bidikov of Mt. Sinai Hospital. Strengthening the area around arthritic joints will provide support, but strenuous exercise can also wear out cartilage.

But Monaco would rather overdo it than underdo it. "Arthritis is something that a lot of people have. And they allow it to debilitate them at too early an age. I say it's an excuse."

With the other Achilles runners, she started on the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge at 8 a.m. last Sunday, three hours before the pack. This time, thanks to a special sports band she wore below her left knee, the pain wasn't too bad. She popped Advil every couple of hours.

Monaco hardly used the cane. Cheered on by the crowd, she even sprinted the final 50 yards.

"I'm fine," she said the next morning. "My knees feel much better. I finished upright with a smile on my face and I was able to run those last few yards." She said she'd give herself a break and take the subway to work for that one day. As for the superfluous cane,

she said, "I borrowed this cane - I'm going to give it back!" ☘

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