



Linda Roster for The New York Times

Donald Arthur of Manhattan, stretching in Central Park, will race-walk in the marathon 15 months after receiving a heart transplant.

Achilles Track Club Presents Its Own Mosaic

By GRACE LICHTENSTEIN

Spectators think of them as wheelchair runners. But only about 100 of the 260 disabled athletes scheduled to compete in the New York City Marathon next week use those sleek, racing wheelchairs.

Under the umbrella of the Achilles Track Club, the disabled competitors include 40 to 50 blind runners and others with multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, cystic fibrosis, polio, heart transplants or autism.

They come from more than 40 countries, including 14 from New Zealand, who will be accompanied during this year's race by Allison Roe, the 1981 New York City champion from their home country. A disabled Australian will be joined by a notable countrywoman, Lisa Ondieki, who broke Roe's course record in 1992.

Elite wheelchair athletes — such as Franz Nietlispach of Switzerland, who won the Paralympics marathon in 1996, and Juana Post of Anchorage and Maryann Schneider from Milford, Pa. — can accelerate to 60 miles an hour on the downhill side of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, and will finish with times faster than those of the elite runners. (The speediest wheelchair group will start 10 minutes before the entire pack.) Other disabled racers may take eight hours or more.

It won't be obvious that among the 30,000-plus competitors will be a Manhattan man running with a heart transplanted just 15 months ago; a war veteran from Hanoi, 51-year-old Tran Trong Cao, who will be using an artificial leg he was fitted for in New York two years ago, and will be accompanied by an American Vietnam veteran. Few lining the course will know that three paraplegics from Soweto who will return home with 42 personal computers donated in conjunction with a job-training program. Or that 30 local participants are members of Gunrunners, a group of

athletes in wheelchairs because of gunshot wounds.

These disabled athletes will be in the marathon because of the Achilles Track Club, a club spearheaded by Dick Traum, a New York Road Runners Club board member who suggested the inclusion of the disabled to Fred Lebow, the marathon's legendary director, when the Achilles was founded 15 years ago.

Before then, a handful of disabled entrants signed up for the race — including Traum, a self-described "hair-impaired" above-the-knee amputee. Today the Achilles Track Club has a budget of \$400,000 and chapters all over the world.

Disabled racing at the New York marathon also has its share of controversy. The Boston Marathon awards prize money to the top wheelchair finishers. New York does not. Instead, New York organizers donate 12 sports wheelchairs, which cost between \$1,500 and \$2,000, on a basis of need and a lottery.

"It's the difference between Athens and Sparta," Traum said about the philosophical difference between the New York and Boston races. "We're interested in bringing people; we're not interested in creating super athletes. We want people running for the enjoyment, not for the dollars."

One runner benefiting from the group's spirit of inclusion is Donald Arthur, a 53-year-old Manhattan bookkeeper and a first-time marathoner. Arthur was a self-described workaholic, a heavy smoker, a drinker and "a firm believer in doing nothing" athletic. But shortly after receiving a heart transplant in August 1996, he began walking regularly as part of his recuperation. After meeting an Achilles member, he joined the group and discovered race-walking, along with "warmth, sincerity, companionship."

After race-walking in four half-marathons and training 40 miles a week, he is thrilled about Sunday's

challenge.

"I look at my watch every day to see the date," Arthur said. "I can just about feel each step. I just can't wait to do it for us — me and my heart, and my donor's family, to let them know that we're O.K."

Craig Jessop of New Zealand is a blind athlete who competes despite having diabetes and kidney failure. According to Peter Loft, who heads the New Zealand contingent, doctors advised Jessop, 30, against running in his first marathon in 1995, but Jessop told them, "At least I'll die doing something."

Now when Jessop returns home after Sunday's race, Loft said, he will get a kidney and pancreas transplant, surgery he wasn't healthy enough to undergo before his training.

The New York race is special to the New Zealanders, Loft said, because Achilles was founded here and because "it's such an emotional event." But the Achilles club does more than inspire.

"A lot of folks in this group have trouble getting work," Traum said, explaining why the club has purchased two taxis with hand controls for use in helping paraplegics to become cabdrivers. It also has programs for people needing cornea transplants and prosthetic limbs.

This year, Achilles will help Yale Medical School researchers survey the club's marathoners for a study of the concept of "thriving" or "resiliency." According to Dr. Jeannette Ickovics, who is part of the team from Yale performing the study, there has been "a paradigm shift away from a focus on illness to one that nurtures good health."

Achilles members are the poster children for this. "I think we can learn from the invulnerable few how exercise helps," said Ickovics, adding that "we all can learn from that model."