

# Friendship Overcomes All

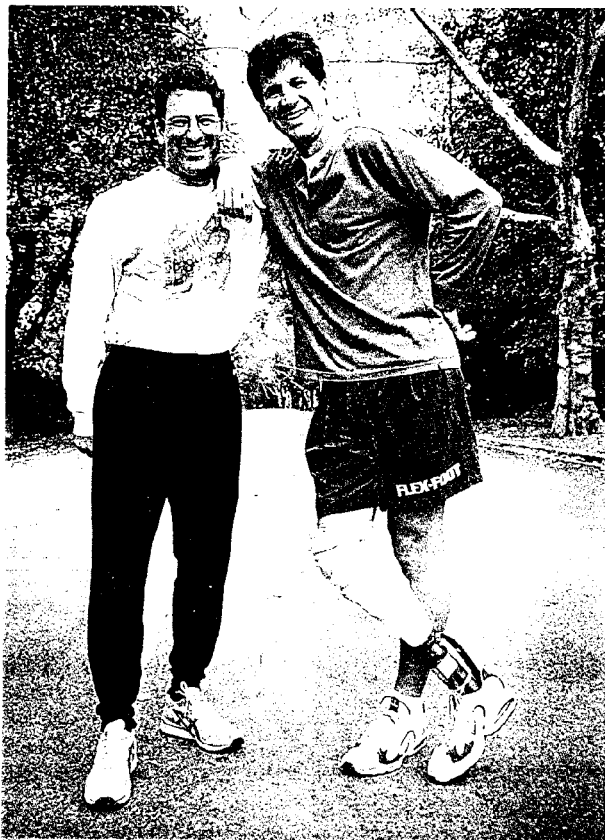
by John Hanc

**MARK SOLDO** and **DAVID WOLF** seemed destined to run the New York City Marathon together. But destiny is a funny thing, as these two old friends found out on November 3.

Soldo and Wolf first met about 15 years ago when Soldo was a star 800-meter runner at Great Neck North High School on Long Island and Wolf was a 4:32 miler at rival Roslyn High. "The old days are precious," says Soldo, 31, who still lives in Great Neck. "The Penn Relays, the Princeton Relays, all the meets we went to together—it was great." Wolf, now 30, agrees. "At age 17, I picked out a lot of the friends that have stayed with me. Mark was one of them."

Life changed dramatically for Wolf in 1983 when he was involved in a serious car accident that left him in a coma. "It was rough," says Soldo, recalling the night he visited his unconscious friend in the hospital. Wolf came out of the coma three months later. Gone were his chances at a college track scholarship. He spent years slowly rebuilding his mind and body, finally making it to American University in Washington, D.C. Through some mutual acquaintances he found Soldo, who was attending the University of Maryland at the time. "I needed a friend like him at that point," says Wolf. "I really latched on to him."

Ironically, Wolf would return his friend's support when Soldo was grievously injured in a car accident one night in 1992. Wolf rushed to visit him. "He had just found out that day that he was going to



Former high school track rivals David Wolf and Mark Soldo have been through a lot together.

lose his leg," recalls Wolf. "I told him he had no choice, that he's got to be as tough as he can."

Soldo was tough. Just a few months after the accident he was jogging on a prosthesis, determined to renew his life as an athlete. Eventually, thanks to proper coaching, effective therapy, and advances in prosthetic technology, he was able to return to competition as a member of the Achilles Track Club.

Meanwhile, Wolf had moved to Manhattan and made his own comeback. He ran New York three years in a row, raising almost \$45,000 for

the Long Island Head Injury Association. For the 1996 Marathon, he decided to volunteer as an Achilles guide. When he showed up at a practice in Central Park in September, there was Soldo, whom he hadn't seen in three years—and who just happened to need a partner for the Marathon.

For two months they trained together, sharing memories and emotions. On Marathon Sunday they were ready to take one more big step, together. "We've both come a really long way," said Soldo before the race. "I'm just so happy that I can do this,

and to do it with Dave will be very special." Said Wolf, "I don't believe that much in fate, but it seems as if this was destined to happen."

Alas, it wasn't. At least not in the sense they had envisioned. At the start, Soldo fell. Although he wasn't hurt, it was a bad omen for what was to come. At about Mile 8, he began to have problems with his new leg. Because his calf muscles had grown from increased training, Soldo had needed a new prosthesis before the Marathon. It was delivered just days before the race. Although it fit perfectly, the metal clamp that holds the leg to his foot hadn't had time to bond properly with the prosthetic device. At about the 12.5-mile mark, on Greenpoint Avenue in Brooklyn, it broke. "All I heard was 'snap,' and my knee went out from under me," recalls Soldo. "I was shocked at first. I looked down and saw the clamp was broken. I just said, 'Dave, go. There's no way I can go on now. The race is over.'"

Wolf continued on. Accompanied by a third friend, Jesse Itzler, Wolf finished comfortably in 3:55. Soldo went home. But he'll be back. Showing the same kind of spirit that has helped them compete—and survive—both Soldo and Wolf promised to return in 1997. "Next year, he'll do it," says Wolf. "I guarantee it." For Soldo, it's not even a question. "Next year, I train properly and break the world amputee record."

That's 3 hours, 17 minutes. A bold prediction for someone who has yet to complete a marathon. But hey, destiny is a funny thing.