

Two Chairs for the Skalas!

by Robert H. Sadler



Peter Skala is accompanied by Achilles volunteers (left), while wife Jolana is joined by Renee Landegger.

For the two Achilles athletes from the Slovak Republic of Kosice, it's an arduous journey from the Verrazano Bridge to Central Park on Marathon Sunday. Yet it's an even longer—not to mention expensive—route to the Verrazano in the first place. It can take a year to obtain an exit visa. Then six hours by car from Kosice to Budapest, because there are no buses or wheelchair-friendly trains to Budapest. Ten hours in the air to New York, and two hours to the Downtown Athletic Club, because cabs won't take wheelchairs and there are never enough vans.

But Peter Skala, 46, and his wife of 18 years, Jolana, 38, came to New York again. They returned to the Big Apple to take another bite, because as Peter says, "We learned what the word 'love' means here. Because people here cheer you up, and nobody cares that you are disabled."

And so, the 26-mile push-pull journey began again for Peter and Jolana. They pushed

off onto the bridge at 8:00 AM along with 204 other physically challenged Achilles Track Club members and their guides. The Skalas were both hoping to better their PRs from last year: 5:30:39 for Peter and 6:12:11 for Jolana.

Last year, the Skalas had to sit at the start for more than three hours because of blowing eight-foot plywood panels that had been duct-taped over the bridge's expansion joints. "This year, it was beautiful," says Peter. "Slow and relaxed. I was testing my new chair. My 50-pound chair took me to the limit last year." His wife agreed. While she doesn't speak English, Jolana understands the language and shook her head vigorously.

Jolana was accompanied by veteran Achilles volunteer running guide Renee Landegger. A Czech-born New Yorker and the wife of New York Road Runners Club emeritus Board member Carl C. Landegger, Renee ran with Jolana last year. But Renee, a seasoned marathoner and a big

fan of Achilles founder Dick Traum, noticed how hard Jolana labored with her 50-pound Slovak-built chair. So after the race, she and husband Carl donated a new chair, weighing only 12 pounds, to Jolana. Prior to the 1996 Marathon, Peter also received a new lightweight chair, through what is now called the "Endow a Chair" program. The results? Two personal bests: a 4:34:08 finish for Peter, and a stunning 3:46:57 for Jolana.

But even with the new racing chairs—average cost between \$1500 and \$2100—it was a long day for the Slovakian couple. All uphill at the start. For Jolana, a former ice skater and badminton player until her back was crushed at age 16, it was 1,815 pushes to the top of the Verrazano. She counted them. She also counted her blessings upon exiting the relatively steep Queensboro Bridge. The Skalas love New York, but they hate the Queensboro Bridge.

Peter is paralyzed from the waist down, the result of an accidental shooting in 1976 while he was serving in the army. Peter and Jolana met in a rehabilitation hospital in Kosice. Jolana was 19. Peter was 27. Peter has a master's degree in philosophy with a minor in English. He had planned to be a teacher before his accident. Now, he occasionally works as a translator for the local court system. Jolana currently attends college, studying psychology and medicine. They live in an apartment building with Jolana's 65-year-old mother, who warches their dog when they're in New York.

There is little public access for wheelchairs in Kosice and wheelchair users are considered unemployable. It took Jolana five years to earn her high school certificate after her accident because her school had no ramps or lifts. She took her final exam in the hallway. When Peter and Jolana met and fell in love, they vowed to start a new life together and to beat the system.

Peter says, "I love New York because no one cares that you are crippled. Here they treat you like you have a brain. Over there, cripples do nothing. They stay in their room, watch television, and drink. It makes no sense to us." What the couple wants most is "not to be considered special or different from other employable workers."

Not special in Slovakia? Maybe. Not special in New York? No way.

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