

M A R A T H O N

Disabled Show How They'd Run a Race

By EDWARD WONG

The danger came when he ran at night. It all appeared indistinct, the traffic and people and buildings. Blurs of shadow, blurs of light. But Paul Ngin Thian Mung had flown across the world to run marathons, and if his eyes did not permit him to train in the dark, he would do it in the mornings.

"We must show people all over the world that disabled people are not hopeless," said Mung, 36, who arrived in New York last November from Myanmar. "We are able."

Mung is visually impaired, and he is believed to be the first runner to come from the former Burma to compete in American marathons. Last November, he finished the New York City Marathon in just under five hours. He expects to run in the Boston Marathon on April 16. But it is the Achilles Marathon, to be run for the first time this Sunday in Prospect Park, Brooklyn, that he says holds a special appeal.

That is because this marathon spotlights disabled athletes like Mung, and it is taking place against the backdrop of disputes between such athletes and the organizers of the New York City Marathon.

About 2,000 runners, both disabled and able-bodied, are expected to turn out. The event is put on by the Achilles Track Club, which was founded in 1983 and promotes marathon running among the disabled. Last year, all but a dozen or so of the 300 disabled athletes who ran in the New York City Marathon were Achilles members.

With more than 10,000 members worldwide, Achilles is the largest and most vocal group of its kind. Several members filed recent lawsuits charging the New York Road Runners Club, which organizes the New York City Marathon, with discrimination.

Achilles officials are careful to say that Sunday's race is not intended to make a statement about the status of disabled runners, many of whom have expressed discontent with their place in the New York City Marathon. And the Road Runners Club is helping with the race by providing some equipment and employees. At the same time, several Achilles officials continue to be upset about new rules that they say threaten to make this year's New York City Marathon less accessible for disabled athletes.

"We tried to do things in this marathon which we felt weren't necessarily being done in the New York City Marathon," said Dick Traum, 60, president of Achilles and a hand-cycle wheelchair racer. "This is not a political thing. We're here to have fun."

The event was conceived last year when Traum talked with three city agencies about how to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Americans With Disabilities Act.

Participants are coming from as far away as Bhutan and South Africa. They will run the 26.2 miles in eight laps around Prospect Park. There are separate prize divisions for people who are blind or otherwise visually impaired; have ambulatory disabilities; use push-rim or hand-cycle wheelchairs; or are able-bodied.



Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

Paul Ngin Thian Mung, right, whose vision is impaired, with his guide, Rick Lipsey, running in Central Park.

ied. There are shorter races for children as well. The winner in each adult division gets \$1,000, and the second-place finisher gets a domestic airline ticket. Every child runner will receive a pair of running shoes.

Organizers are encouraging the runners to race for charities. They hope to raise more than \$500,000. But they say their first priority is putting on an event that is all-inclusive, and that is where the New York City Marathon could use some pointers from Achilles, some of the group's members say.

A long and bitter history exists between Road Runners and disabled athletes. In 1978, Bob Hall, a pioneer of wheelchair racing, sued the club after it denied him a spot because he was disabled. In 1998, nine wheelchair athletes filed a lawsuit in federal court accusing Road Runners of repeatedly discriminating against them. The suit was settled in January 2000, and the club agreed to create a separate division for wheelchair athletes and to start that competition early.

On the flip side, while most able-bodied runners have been sympathetic to the wheelchair athletes, some have pointed out the dangers of having them on the roadway, particularly when they reach speeds of more than 30 miles an hour on crowded downhill stretches.

"There might have been some trouble in the past," said Mary Wittenberg, executive vice president of Road Runners. "But we've extended ourselves, and we're excited about our relationship with the disabled."

New rules this year could ignite

further conflict. In January, Achilles received a memorandum from Road Runners outlining several changes, including guidelines that determine starting times. Of particular concern is the likelihood that dozens of wheelchair athletes will start at the same time as the pack of able-bodied runners. Most marathons start wheelchair athletes early.

Robert L. Laufer, a race coordinator for the Road Runners, said the club was instituting a 3.5-hour qualifying time cutoff for wheelchair athletes who want a half-hour early start so that the roadway will remain clear when the lead runners, followed by cars and news vans, catch up to some of the slower wheelchair racers. He said that starting some wheelchair athletes with the pack will actually be safer for them, a position that many Achilles members contend makes no sense and could be dangerous.

The other new rule worrying Achilles officials is a Sept. 15 deadline for the registration of volunteer guides for disabled runners. In past years, Achilles was responsible for signing up volunteers and giving the list to Road Runners a week or two before the race. This year, Road Runners wants to manage that process, saving an administrative nightmare

arises when the list is submitted so close to the race.

Achilles officials say they fear that not enough volunteers will make the deadline because more than 80 percent of the 300 or so volunteers have usually signed up after September. But Laufer said Road Runners would try to use guides recommended by Achilles and would consider extending the deadline if enough volunteers did not sign up.

As for the Achilles Marathon, if it catches on, it could expand in future years, Traum said. After all, more than 40,000 applicants who put their names into the lottery for New York City Marathon bibs are rejected each year.

"It seems strange that there isn't some way to accommodate all the people who want to run," he said. "We live in a state of capitalism where supply should meet demand."