

The Metro Section

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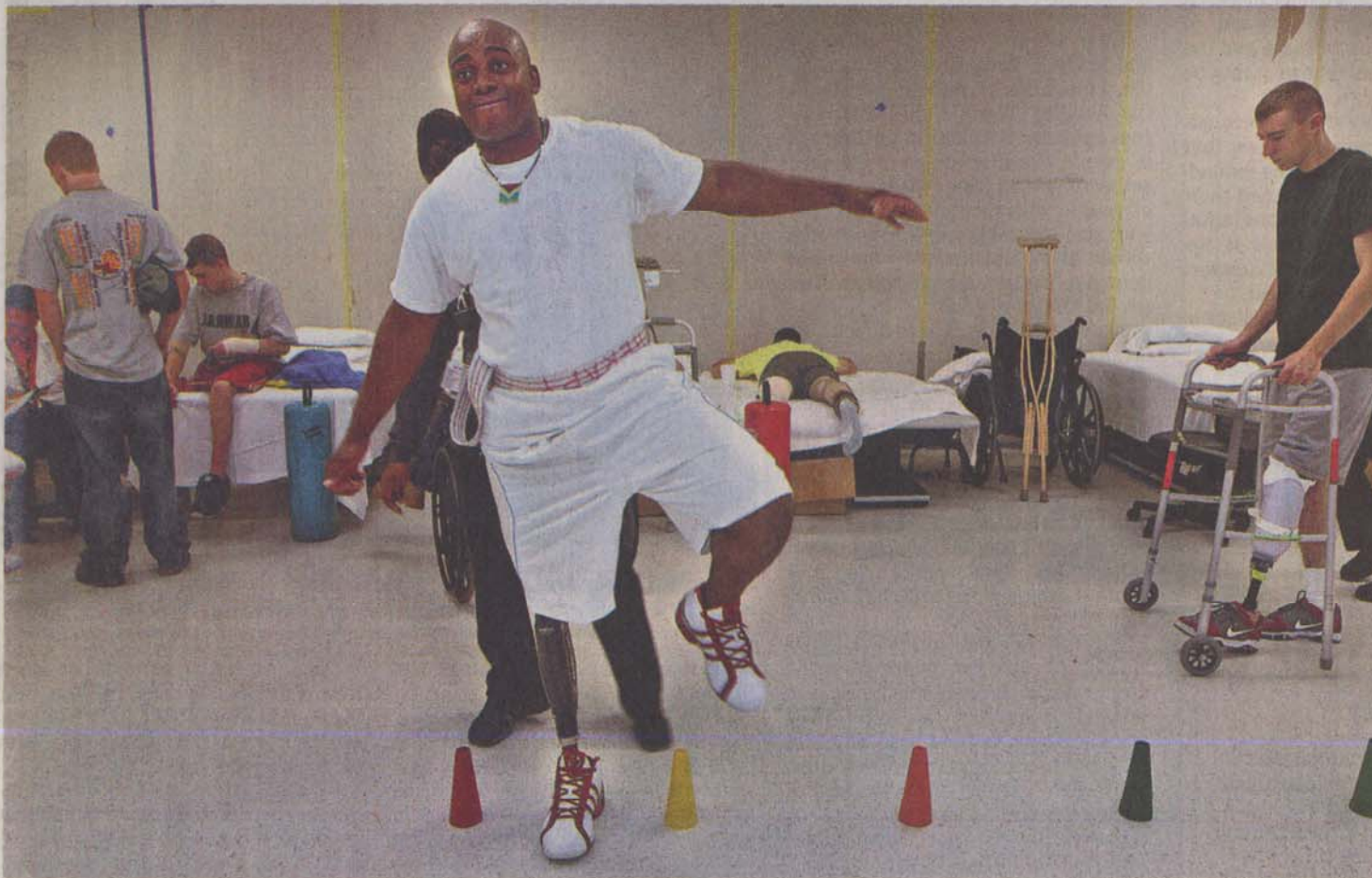
B1

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The New York Times

DAN BARRY/About New York

Back From Iraq, With a Long Way to Go (Nearly 27 Miles)



Carol T. Powers for The New York Times

Staff Sgt. Hilbert Caesar, in physical therapy at Walter Reed hospital, will use a hand-cranked cycle to compete in the marathon.

ONE week from tomorrow, the streets of this city will flow with a head-bobbing stream of resolve: Tens of thousands of competitors pushing themselves 26 miles and 385 yards forward, by foot or by wheel, to a Central Park destination that represents more than just the finish line of the New York City Marathon.

Among these marathoners will be those who propel themselves by churning the hand pedals of low-riding racing wheelchairs.

Among these hand-cyclists will be about two dozen soldiers, up from the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, who left a leg, or more, on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan.

And among these war-injured soldiers will be Staff Sgt. Hilbert Caesar, six months past losing his right leg in Baghdad, pumping those hand pedals through the city of his adolescence. Feeling the absence. But feeling too the adrenaline, the burn.

Sergeant Caesar, 27, has a shaved head and an upper body of granite. He is among the many foreign-born who accept jobs risking their lives for their adopted country. A native of Guyana, he moved to Queens when he was 11 years old, on Nov. 5, 1988. He remembers, he said. "It was a cold day."

He went to this high school, and then that one, and then took some time off to figure things out. He moved to Roosevelt, on Long Island. He got his high school equivalency diploma and took some college courses in criminal justice, but set all that aside for a

Continued on Page B2

Back From Iraq, and Training To Conquer Over 26 Miles

Continued From Page B1

three-year hitch with the Army.

"January 29, 1998," he said. "I was trying to travel, see the world."

He did, sort of: Oklahoma for basic training, near the border of North Korea, Kosovo, the Army base in Baumholder, Germany. He was an artilleryman, moving up the ranks within his planet of the First Armored Division universe. He re-enlisted once, then twice, and remained unattached. "I'm as single as they come," he said.

From late May 2003 to mid-April, Sgt. Caesar did his job as a soldier in Baghdad: patrolling, raiding, searching cars at checkpoints. With the end of his tour in Iraq drawing near, he was looking forward to spending some time in Spain and the Netherlands. Who knows, maybe meet a woman or two.

But with the way things were going, he and his comrades knew that their tour would probably be extended. When the Army confirmed their fears, they thought of all those fantasies unrealized and sucked it up. "We're soldiers," he said. "We expect the worst and hope for the best."

A couple of days later, April 18 to be exact, Sergeant Caesar and some other soldiers were dispatched in tanklike vehicles called self-propelled howitzers to a "hot sector." Their job was to protect a supply route, look for I.E.D.'s — improvised explosive devices — and engage the enemy if the enemy showed its face.

The enemy did not. Instead, it detonated some ammunition by remote control, rocking Sergeant Caesar's vehicle and sending shrapnel through metal and flesh. A moment

of suspended reality followed the boom, a stilled silence in the midst of roaring war.

Then reality returned: one soldier with part of his calf blown off; another shrapnel-riddled soldier who would lose an arm; and Sergeant Caesar, not quite aware that his right leg was dangling by skin below the knee.

"I tried to take a step and I just dropped down," he recalled. "That's when I realized my leg was gone."

Nine days later — April 27 — Sergeant Caesar was in a bed at Walter Reed. Sometimes he would look down there, at the absence, and ache. Other times, though, he thanked God for sparing his life. He began working out in the physical therapy unit, where some civilians from New York were proselytizing about some club.

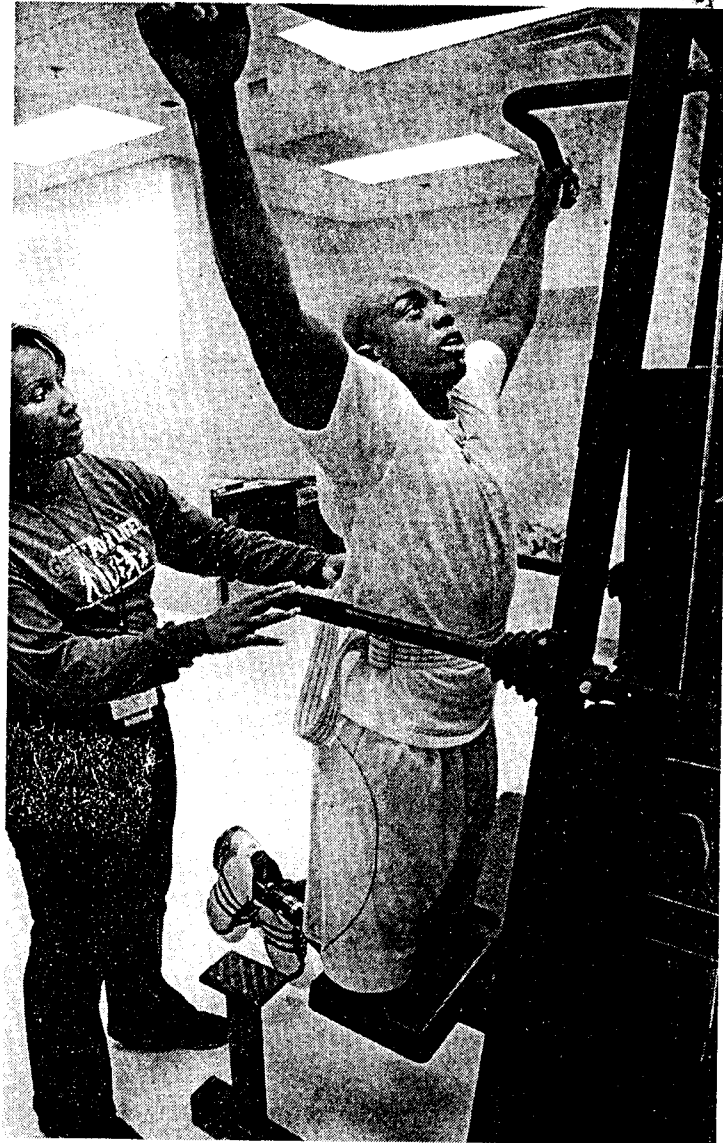
Their names were Dick Traum and Mary Bryant. He was an amputee, a marathoner, and the founder of the Achilles Track Club, which encourages the disabled to participate in events like marathons to enhance self-esteem and foster the perception of people with disabilities as people with abilities. She was a cancer survivor and marathoner who had helped a brother, a quadriplegic, finish the 1997 marathon.

They used their experiences to connect with soldiers, and to say with confidence that if the soldiers gave the marathon a shot, as Ms. Bryant put it, "You will rock."

Sergeant Caesar remembers the day that Ms. Bryant approached him about trying out one of these hand-cranked wheelchairs. "I was like, aah, I don't know about that," he recalled. "And then when I tried it, I didn't think I wanted to do any marathon."

But the Achilles pitch gradually registered. Soldiers joined in dribs and drabs, including, eventually, the sergeant missing a leg. They wheeled laps around the physical therapy room through late winter, and when spring came, around a large circular walkway outside. For their first goal they focused on a five-mile Central Park event in August.

That August day finally came, and amid rain and thunder, Sergeant Caesar wheeled across the line first



Carol T. Powers for The New York Times

Sergeant Caesar and physical therapist Isatta Jackson; the sergeant finished first in his group in a five-mile event in Central Park in August.

in his Achilles crowd. "He flies," Ms. Bryant said.

After that, there was no question that the New York marathon would have a Walter Reed presence. One soldier who lost his arm in battle has focused on finding a new balance in body and mind. Another has a plan to switch to a fresh prosthetic leg at the marathon's halfway point.

Another soldier, a woman, had trained in a hand-crank wheelchair

for the August race, only to learn that infection had set in, and that more of her leg would have to be removed. Now, Ms. Bryant said, "She is back with a vengeance."

And, of course, there is that Guyana-born staff sergeant, training this weekend on hospital roads, his arms and chest aching from the hand crank repetition. He is itching to show his city how he moves, how he flies.

Safety Note

Fire prevention authorities recommend that smoke alarm batteries be changed twice yearly, at the start and the end of daylight saving time. The time change occurs tomorrow morning.