

# Still up and running

## Central Park Jogger putting one foot in front of the other

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On a Saturday morning in August 1989, Trisha Meili left her small room at the Gaylord rehabilitation center in Wallingford, Conn., walked outside and took the first meaningful strides toward reclaiming her life — a quarter-mile jog around the parking lot.

She started slowly, with "heavy" legs and barely any energy, then found a rhythm, one foot in front of the other, gingerly negotiating the tiniest bumps in the pavement.

Meili had been invited by a half-dozen Achilles Track Club members — disabled athletes who were also patients at Gaylord, one of whom was in a wheelchair — to join their run.

"I felt like I had conquered the world," Meili says, recalling the moment she knew her life would go on. "It was very exhilarating. I was so proud of being out there, even though I was barely able to complete a quarter-mile. I kept thinking, 'If these people can do it, I've got to keep trying.'"

A few months earlier, on April 19, Meili was left for dead in a Central Park ravine following a savage assault and rape. By the time she arrived at Gaylord on June 7, she was known around the world as the "Central Park Jogger," a label she still carries.

"In that park I nearly died," she says. "The doctors doubted my recovery, doubted I would even walk again."

Meili was a 28-year-old investment banker at Salomon Brothers and on a fast career track in the spring of 1989. She would routinely polish off five-mile runs through Central Park at night after long hours at the office. But on that April evening, the routine turned horrific.

As she jogged across the 102nd Street transverse, Meili was attacked, beaten and raped so brutally, she later claimed in her memoir, that the only unharmed parts of her body were "the soles of my feet." She lost 80% of her blood, had severe head trauma, multiple contusions and was found wearing only a jogging bra.

Five youths were charged with the attack and the crime drew international news coverage. In a recent bizarre twist to the case during the summer of 2002, a convicted murderer and serial rapist named Matias Reyes admitted to committing the attack on Meili. In December that same year,

the five youths originally charged had their convictions thrown out.

Meili's name was never mentioned in news reports. It was released last year when she decided to reveal her identity through the release of her memoir, "I Am the Central Park Jogger."

By the time of the book's publication, however, Meili had long since become an integral voice among the Achilles runners. She now serves as the group's board chairman and while she won't run in today's 35th New York City Marathon, she serves as an inspirational voice to the Achilles participants.

Following her release from Gaylord, Meili vowed to learn more about the organization that had helped her take those first strides. She started volunteering with Achilles members and still runs in shorter distance races around Central Park.

"I always felt there was such a community feeling to Achilles," she says.

Achilles founder Dick Traum helped convince Meili to run the New York Marathon in 1995. She finished the 26.2-mile course in four and a half hours. Before the start of the city's marquee running event each year, Meili makes a point of meeting with Achilles participants — particularly those with brain injuries — to share her story and help inspire them as they prepare to tackle the grueling course.

"It's such a wonderful sense of accomplishment," Meili says, when asked about her '95 milestone. "It captured a number of lessons. When I was running through Central Park and feeling the support of strangers, I really felt I had reclaimed my park. I knew I would finish, but crossing that line was such a feeling of accomplishment."

At the annual Achilles pre-marathon dinner at midtown's Cornell Club on Friday night, Meili met with athletes from a South African organization called "Headway."

All the group's members suffer from some type of head injury and a few months ago, were given a copy of Meili's memoir. The dozen Headway athletes who arrived in New York Friday say they did not know about Meili's infamous attack before reading her book.

"Oh my God, she's amazing,"



says 33-year-old Boitumeno Kgomo, a security guard for Chubb Insurance in Johannesburg, South Africa, who was shot in the head when he was mistaken for a robber. "She's such an inspiration for me having had a similar injury. I'm so overwhelmed."

Meili says it's unlikely she'll run another marathon. "Well, never say never, but it's too hard on my knees," she says, laughing. She has participated in smaller runs through the Achilles group — the Achilles Hope and Possibility 5K race.

Meili still suffers the effects of double vision and trouble with her balance, stemming from the attack. But aside from a tiny scar on her left cheek, there is little physical evidence of what happened that April evening.

People recognize the face now, though. As she walked around the crowded Cornell Club dining area Friday, mingling with people who will participate in the marathon in wheelchairs, or with crutches, or with artificial limbs, she was stopped, embraced and congratulated by many of the athletes. One young woman who approached Meili had recently returned from Iraq after losing her left leg in a roadside bombing. Another suffered from multiple sclerosis. Both will run today.

"Many people feel some kind of connection with my story. But part of it is, life is an ordeal," Meili says. "We all face some kind of struggle or crisis. So when I talk with these people, I try to tell them about the lessons I've learned. With suffering, there is no hierarchy."

The Central Park Jogger, Trisha Meili (r), poses with South African runner Boitumeno Kgomo (above), at the Achilles 14th Annual Tribute Dinner.

### AT A GLANCE

**WHAT:** The 35th ING New York City Marathon  
**WHERE:** All five boroughs  
**Number of runners:** 35,000  
**TV:** WNBC (Ch. 4), 9 a.m.-2 p.m.  
**START TIMES:** 9:05 a.m. (wheelchair); 9:35 a.m. (elite women); 10:10 a.m. (elite men and the rest of the field)  
**DEFENDING CHAMPIONS:** Martin Lel, Kenya (2:10:30), Margaret Okayo, Kenya (course-record 2:22:31)  
**Prize money:** \$100,000 to male and female winners (doubled for Americans), plus time bonuses  
**WEATHER FORECAST:** High 50s and sunny