

WHEELCHAIR DIVISION

Boca Raton man finishes long road to his first victory

■ **Renzo Martinez, who was paralyzed in 1986 in a car wreck, won the wheelchair division of the Walt Disney marathon despite a late flat tire.**

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LAKE BUENA VISTA — It took 16 tries, but Boca Raton marathoner Renzo Martinez finally won his first marathon.

After defying death at age 22, he wasn't going to let something like a flat tire stop him at 40. Despite the resistance and an aching body after 24 miles, Martinez pushed his wheelchair racer on a flat left tire the final two miles of Sunday's Walt Disney World Marathon to take the wheelchair title by seven seconds.

"I had to slow down. It got a lot more difficult to push," said Martinez, who won in 2 hours 12 minutes 29 seconds. "I was too close to stop, so I just kept pushing. The chair

got a lot heavier. I probably lost 5 or 6 minutes over two miles."

Finishing in second: Dick Pace, 55, of Monette, Ark.

"You go a whole lot slower with a flat tire," said half-marathon women's wheelchair winner Kristen Messer, 17, of Austin, Texas. "The wheel feels like it's caught on something, like it's stuck. You have to work twice as hard to go the same distance.

"I think [Martinez] is really cool."

Messer, a high school senior with cerebral palsy, should know.

She pushed her chair the last five miles Sunday on a flat right tire but still finished in 1:19:22.

As for Martinez, he had come too far and had too much pride at stake to give in to a deflated tire.

A computer programmer for the Department of Transportation, Martinez is a former off-road race car driver



GENE DUNCAN/FOR WALT DISNEY WORLD

FIRST-TIME WINNER: Renzo Martinez wins the Walt Disney World Marathon wheelchair title Sunday, despite having a flat left tire for the final two miles.

from the Dominican Republic. He was paralyzed from the waist down in a wreck in 1986 during a road rally near Santo Domingo.

"I went off the road, down a hill and landed in the middle of a river," he said. "The next thing I knew I was in a hospital.

"The way I see it, everybody has problems, everybody has challenges. Mine is

[this]. I'm sure there are some people who have challenges that I wouldn't want. This is the one I have, and this is the one I have to live with."

Martinez said when he was trapped in his car, then woke up in the hospital, he knew he was in deep trouble.

"Basically, right then and there, I knew it was going to be up to me.

"I kept going with a lot of

faith and a lot of help."

Martinez's wife, Marisa, was his physical therapist in the Dominican Republic.

She came to the race Sunday with family members and her husband's boss, and was overcome with emotion.

"Winning is a team effort," Renzo said after waving to his wife, who stood beyond a course fence.

"Nobody makes it alone."