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**Neal Rubin**

## Bernstein sets the pace for athletes with disabilities



There's no sugar-coating this, and Richard Bernstein doesn't even try. Five hours and 15 minutes was an abysmal time in the New York City Marathon two Sundays ago, even for a guy with a sore leg.

Running on a tether.  
Who's blind.

"It's horrible," Bernstein says. "I'm embarrassed." Which is a wonderful thing, because it means he's become enough of a competitor to kick himself over a slow finish in a 26-mile race.

For the record, the lawyer from Birmingham placed 31,905th out of 37,840 finishers. It was better than his first marathon, three years ago in Detroit, when he barely beat six hours. But it was 45 minutes behind what he now considers his normal pace.

As for how a blind runner even has a normal pace, Bernstein credits the Achilles Track Club, a New York nonprofit dedicated to putting runners with disabilities at the starting line. He's hoping to start an Achilles chapter in Detroit, which among other things would cut down on the distance he has to go to train: to Central Park, in Manhattan, every weekend.

### Right for the challenge

Win some, lose some. Richard Bernstein, 33, was born blind. He also was born smart and raised to be driven in a family with the wherewithal to make sure he could stretch his boundaries.

His dad is Sam Bernstein, as in 1-800-CALL-SAM. That's where Richard works, at the family law firm, and that's the number to call if you'd like to get involved with Achilles. Just make sure to mention that you weren't bitten by a dog.

Bernstein made it through the University of Michigan and Northwestern University by memorizing everything he needed to know. He practices law the same way.

Among other things, he's a 2005 Detroit News Michiganiaan of the Year, a member of the Wayne State Board of Governors and a knockout puncher in disability rights court cases.

And, he will tell you proudly, he's an athlete. It took him a while to realize that, but he went from a treadmill to marathons to a slot in the Ironman triathlon in Hawaii next August.

"If you want to help energize and excite disabled people," he says, "get them into athletics."

### Runners wanted

Dick Traum founded Achilles in 1983. That was seven years after he ran his first marathon, and 18 years after a car pinned him against his own vehicle and he lost his right leg above the knee.

Traum, 65, has seen Achilles expand to 40 chapters in the United States and dozens of others in places as remote as Mongolia. "Have you ever seen a blind person sweat?" he asks. "Probably not."

If you had, he suggests, it might keep you from automatically associating "blind" with "frail." Not that Achilles works only with the blind; Bernstein has shared his training runs in Central Park with Iraq War veterans putting early miles on their prosthetic limbs.

When Bernstein runs a marathon, he's tethered to one runner and accompanied by several more who give him directions -- "Gradual left." Hard right!"

As an organization, Achilles doesn't get much more complicated than that. Bernstein is looking for a coordinator and a passel of volunteer runners, be they track club members, high school cross country teams or moms who like to jog a few miles after the kids leave for school.

He'll look forward to hearing from you, unless you catch him on the wrong weekend in March.

He's booked for a marathon in California that month, and here's fair warning to whoever runs with him: "Five hours and fifteen minutes will not be tolerated!"

Reach Neal Rubin at (313) 222-1874 or [nrubin@detnews.com](mailto:nrubin@detnews.com).

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