

Veteran-supporter in it for the long run

For Palm Beacher **David McCourt**, soldiers wounded in Afghanistan and Iraq saw their lives change forever while standing up for his wife, **Ruth**, and their 4-year-old daughter, **Juliana** — both killed when hijackers flew United Flight 175 into the World Trade Center on 9/11.

So McCourt, 59, who moved to the millionaires' playground three years ago to escape the Connecticut home built with Ruth, says he feels a particular kinship to a dozen soldiers competing in the Marathon of the Palm Beaches.

They're young men and women who returned from the war missing a leg, or both, usually from roadside bombings or gun battles. Sometimes with no family and a bleak future, the vets see competition as therapy, physical pain to heal the moral sufferings that come with life-altering injuries.

Fans lined up along Flagler in WPB Dec. 3 won't be able to miss them. They'll be clad in their Achilles Freedom Team red shirts with blue sleeves, racing in custom-made wheelchairs.



McCourt

"They have a special place in my heart," said McCourt.

As a board member of the Achilles Freedom Team, a nonprofit designed to persuade wounded soldiers to take up long-distance running, McCourt is partly responsible for bringing the team here

for the first time.

"They stood against what happened on 9/11 and they'll suffer for the rest of their lives for it. I derive so much courage from them. Until recently, I was emotionally crippled," the semi-retired businessman said.

"But knowing how some of them want to go back to Iraq, you see they're not

about self-pity or resentment."

In a sense, Palm Beach already has adopted guys such as 29-year-old **Sgt. Dan Metzdorf** of the 82nd Airborne. Metzdorf's right leg was amputated above the knee as the result of a 2004 Baghdad roadside bombing. The Army tried to retire him, yet he's back on active duty and competes in a hand-cranked chair. Or **Dustin Tuller**, from Milton, Fla., who was shot up by a sniper near Baghdad in late 2003. Doctors didn't expect him to survive. A double amputee, he'll finish in two hours.

"The Doubletree in West Palm is putting up the entire team," McCourt said. "Avis is giving us the vans. Cafe Saponi is giving some meals. And we're hoping to raise \$100,000 while they're here to keep the program going."

McCourt, who defends the United States' invasion of Iraq, is holding a \$125-per fund-raiser Dec. 1 at the home of antiwar Democrat **George Cloutler**.