

BIG TOWN BIG HEART

CELEBRATING NEW YORKERS WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

BY JEFF TAMARKIN

Although last Sunday's ING New York City Marathon was the 16th that Dick Traum has completed, the enthusiastic cheers from the sidelines meant no less to him than they did the first time.

An above-the-knee amputee, Traum is the founder of the Achilles Track Club, which since 1983 has promoted physical fitness and a positive attitude among those experiencing virtually every type of disability.

"Many people will tell you that their favorite part of the marathon is seeing the disabled people running by," says Traum, 65, with a broad smile.

"You see other people having a disability and in effect overcoming it, and you say, 'If that person can do that, I can go back and get my college degree,' or whatever it is. It's wonderful to see someone rise from being unsuccessful to being successful in an unusual way."

This year, Traum, one of several hundred Achilles members who participated in the race, accompanied a first-time disabled marathoner throughout the 26.2-mile, five-borough course.

Among the determined members of Achilles are wounded war veterans, blind runners, diabetics and those who've experienced strokes and traumatic head injuries. Some use crutches, prosthetic limbs or wheelchairs, others no aids at all.

Traum was a young graduate student when, in 1965, he stopped for gas on the New Jersey Turnpike. He was standing behind his car when another pulled up. The driver reached over to open the stuck passenger-side door and the car lurched forward.

Instead of stepping on the brake, the panicked driver slammed his foot down on the accelerator, pinning Traum and shattering both of his legs. The right one soon became gangrenous and had to be amputated.

Ten years after the accident, having earned his Ph.D. and become a successful businessman, Traum was speaking at a conference when a friend mentioned that he looked a bit overweight.

Traum, who has a 30-year-old son and lives on the upper East Side with his wife of 38 years, recalls, "He asked me, 'Why don't you join the West Side YMCA?' I thought it was a great idea so I joined. Then someone asked me, 'Can you run?' So I said sure and I hopped and skipped as you would if you had a cast on your leg."

"Over time, I built up to where I could jog for 15 minutes. I was really proud of myself. Then it was a mile, and as soon as you do a mile, you want to do 2 miles. Almost a year later, I ran a 5-mile race, then a half marathon and finally the New York City Marathon on Oct. 24, 1976."

Traum became the first disabled runner to complete the course.

Inspired by the late Terry Fox, a young amputee who had made headlines and raised money for cancer research by running a marathon a day across Canada, Traum sensed that New York might benefit from an or-



Dick Traum has been in the NYC Marathon 16 times.

JULIA XANTHOS

RUNNING FOR THE HIGH OF IT

Amputee founded Achilles Track Club 23 years ago

ganization that trained the disabled to run. After its first year, Achilles had six members.

Today the club boasts 40 chapters in the United States and 110 international chapters on six continents.

bility run/walk each August in Central Park, its name taken from Meil's book "I Am the Central Park Jogger: A Story of Hope and Possibility."

Traum also co-authored a book, "Victory for Humanity," which details his story and the mission of Achilles.

"When you run, you get what's called a runner's high," says the graying Traum, sitting at his cramped desk in the club's midtown offices.

"You have this chemical change where you're feeling the world is yours and you're floating on air. Many people will describe their first marathon as the favorite day of their lives."

"What you're doing is getting people to feel really good about themselves and to raise their level of aspiration. Also, other people see you differently and treat you differently."

An integral component of Achilles' mission is the integration of disabled athletes with those who are not. Traum, who uses a hand-crank wheelchair when participating in marathons, calls it mainstreaming.

"If you meet people who aren't disabled, you feel more comfortable, and that gives people who are not disabled the opportunity to rub shoulders," he says.

Traum believes that Achilles can even benefit Alzheimer's patients. "I'd love to see in the future a situation where two words that have never before been seen together in the English language are used together: Alzheimer's marathoner," he says.

"I believe that there is a sixth sense — the feeling that you have when you cross the finish line, the feeling of ecstasy," says Traum. "Like the other senses, if you have a significant option to use it, it's imprinted on the brain and it becomes addictive. And you have a feeling of success in your heart."

For more information on the Achilles Track Club, visit www.achillestrackclub.org.

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