

Marine set to run marathon

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Marine Sgt. James King, 27, wounded in Iraq, attended a health and fitness fair at the D.C. Armory yesterday and will run in the Marine Corps Marathon today. J.M. EDDINS JR. (THE WASHINGTON TIMES)

James King doesn't remember the bomb that cost him a leg and the hearing in his left ear. Sitting at the Marine Corps Marathon's health and fitness expo yesterday, one day before the race, Marine Sgt. King plucked a buckeye from the left pocket of his faded camouflage shorts and idly rolled it between his fingers. Keeping one of the horse chestnut tree nuts in your pocket, Sgt. King said, was something his grandfather told him was good luck. He had one in his pocket the day his unit was attacked in Iraq, but had to get another, which he will carry with him today in the marathon.

"That one didn't come back to me, but I figured it did its job," said Sgt. King, 27. "Saved my life." Sgt. King, whose left leg is amputated above the knee, will use a device called a handcycle to cover the 26.2-mile course. He is a member of **the Achilles Freedom Team**, a project run by the Achilles Track Club, a New York-based organization that helps disabled persons in mainstream athletic competitions.

"I never had the desire to run a marathon in any way, shape or form until I got hit," Sgt. King said. "It's a way to keep in shape. Right now, there's not a lot I can do for a cardio workout." Sgt. King has no problem talking about his experience 2 1/2 years ago. He says his unit was on foot patrol May 29, 2004, in a small town half an hour west of Fallujah. The midday temperatures approached 120 degrees, and what was supposed to be a three-hour patrol ended in its sixth hour.

"When I first woke up, I didn't remember anything of the day I was hit," said Sgt. King, whose memory of the events continues to return as he talks to his comrades. He does remember he climbed into a Humvee to return to the combat outpost. Those next to him recall the white station wagon on the side of the road, which contained explosives detonated by remote control as they drove past. Sgt. King spent five days in Germany in a drug-induced coma before being flown back to the United States. He then spent 17 days in a stateside hospital. With his knee and shin shattered, infection set in around the shrapnel wounds and the leg had to be amputated.

During physical therapy, Sgt. King was approached by the Achilles Track Club. While infections in his lungs and leg kept him from participating in all but three races sponsored by the Achilles Freedom Team, Sgt. King remained cautiously optimistic about his chances in a full marathon.

"I'm a bit nervous," he said. "But I'm gonna get it done, I just ain't going gonna get it done very fast." Sgt. King said he knew he would eventually work his way up to a marathon, and hopes success here will lead to his competing next weekend in the New York City marathon. "If I haven't recovered, I still want to go up to cheer some of the guys on," he said.

Among those in the crowd tomorrow will be Sgt. King's fiancée. "She's never known me as an able-bodied person before," he said. "She says I do more with one leg than most guys do with two."