

The Elites

THESE ARE THE RUNNERS WHO GET paid never to be late to a finish line. But exactly 48 hours from the marathon start, they're a half hour overdue for their photo shoot—and everyone waiting for them is anxious. Then suddenly, this pack of professionals crests a hill near Central Park Sheep's Meadow, looking more like kids on a field trip than eight of the world's fastest humans. There's Stefano Baldini, the reigning Olympic Marathon champ. Catherine Ndereba, the second fastest female marathoner ever. Even Meb Keflezighi, who reportedly had awakened this morning with the flu and would need to skip out of the photo shoot. "Meb, you made it," someone calls out to the American star. Meb just smiles from under his ski hat. Paul Tergat puts an arm around Jelena Prokopcuka and squeezes her tight. On this early fall morning, the two defending New York champions are all grins and giggles and shivers. Could he really be the same man who outsprinted Hendrick Ramaala in a grueling duel to win the 2005 race? Could she be the same fierce woman who, come Sunday, would drop favorites Ndereba and Deena Kastor for the win? The elites tease one another as the photographer snaps, and for these few moments they look like anything but rivals. Then, with the last picture taken, they step down from the platform and scatter, as quickly as they had arrived.

LEADERS OF THE PACK

New York's star-studded field: (standing, from left) Paul Tergat (Kenya, 2:10:10); Meb Keflezighi (USA, 2:22:02); Hendrick Ramaala (South Africa, 2:13:04); Rodgers Rop (Kenya, 2:11:24); (seated, from left) Jelena Prokopcuka (Latvia, 2:25:05); Alan Culpepper (USA, did not finish); Catherine Ndereba (Kenya, 2:26:58); and Stefano Baldini (Italy, 2:11:33).



UNDAUNTED A few of the 350-plus Achilles Track Club runners in New York, from left: Nooria Nodrat (7:39:25), with her guide dog, Yahoo; Bouabacar Traore (6:45:38); John Plata (7:29:35); Melynda Schnee (2:31:27); and Crista Earl (4:12:03), with her guide dog, Paige.

The Achilles Track Club

IN COLLEGE SPORTS, THE TERM "RED SHIRT" MEANS YOU'RE SITTING OUT; YOU'RE bypassing your eligibility now to play later. In the New York City Marathon, however, the red shirt of the Achilles Track Club means you're playing when many people might think you can't. Achilles has helped athletes with disabilities participate in running events since 1983. For the 2006 marathon, they fielded more than 350 athletes, including the five pictured here, each of whom regards 26.2 miles as just another challenge. Nooria Nodrat and Crista Earl are both legally blind, yet combined they've finished the marathon eight times. John Plata is a deaf runner with 20 New York medals. Then there's Melynda Schnee and Bouabacar Traore. Each of them has lost a leg, yet neither has been slowed. Schnee will compete in her second New York on a course considered extremely tough for hand-crankers, while three-time finisher Traore will go on one leg and two crutches—and a smile as bright as his shirt.