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New York's disabled athletes cheer Olympics ruling

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Disabled athletes across New York proclaimed victory Friday after an international court ruled a double-amputee can compete for a place in this summer's Olympics.

✓ "I felt like jumping up and down on one leg," said Dick Traum, 67, who lost a leg in a car accident in 1965 and went on to compete in marathons. Traum founded the Achilles Track Club in Manhattan, which runs competitions for disabled athletes.

Overruling a ban by an association of athletic federations, the Court of Arbitration for Sport unanimous ruling means Oscar Pistorius of South Africa is eligible to compete for a spot at the Beijing Olympics. Critics had said Pistorius, born without the outer bone between the knee and ankle in both legs, has an unfair advantage because he runs on carbon fiber blades.

"It's awesome," said Todd Schaffhauser of Roslyn, who won a gold medal in a 100-meter race in the 1988 summer Paralympics. "It will be great having somebody of that athletic ability as spokesperson for people with disabilities."

"This is absolutely a victory for society as a whole, not just amputees," said John Fernandez of Shoreham, an Army veteran who has had prosthetic legs since surviving a "friendly fire" bombing in Iraq five years ago. Fernandez, who skis, hunts and plays lacrosse, has made a mission of showing injured veterans can thrive at home, on the job and on the playing field.

Pistorius, a college student, has been blazing along the track in races for the disabled. He needs to run faster for a qualifying time to run in the individual 400-meter races in Beijing. Still, the South African relay squad can select him as an alternate without asking him to improve his qualifying times.

Pistorius is known for his demanding training regimen, as well as his refusal to be seen as disabled. His demand to be treated equally started a controversy about whether athletes who have prosthetic devices have an edge - and whether the disabled athletes are more likely to become injured in competitions.

"One day in the future these devices might give an advantage, but for now we have to train just as hard, we have to push our bodies just as hard," Fernandez said.



At the Achilles Club, Traum remembered his first run in the New York City Marathon 32 years ago. "I joked that I had to finish last because if I finished first they would disqualify me," he said. "Now, finally, people realize that an amputee could finish first."

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PHOTO GALLERY

American Veterans Took Part in Krakow Marathon



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✓ A group of five wounded American veterans represented the Achilles Track Club Freedom Team of Wounded Veterans in the Krakow Marathon Sunday, May 4, 2008. The Freedom Team was founded in 2004 to introduce recently wounded soldiers of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars to athletic competition. Former New York City Fire Chief and 9/11 hero Dan Daly was part of the American delegation supporting the Achilles Freedom Team efforts. On May 5, the Freedom Team representatives and Chief Daly met with students at an integrated middle school in Nowa Huta to share their experiences in overcoming challenges and discuss the benefits of volunteerism.

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