

Human Race

NEWS, TRENDS, AND REGULAR RUNNERS DOING AMAZING THINGS

GUIDING FORCE

Trisha Meili races with challenged athletes every June in the same park where she was attacked.



Moving Forward

The Central Park Jogger runs strong two decades later
BY SARAH LORGE BUTLER

EACH JUNE, TRISHA MEILI returns to the place where she almost died 20 years ago. She speaks to 4,000 or so athletes—some on prosthetic limbs or in wheelchairs, some with transplanted organs, others tethered to runners who'll help them along—gathered at the Hope & Possibility five-miler in New York City's Central Park. Meili, 48, has no visible disability. She serves as a guide, aiding a wounded war vet or a brain-injury survivor. Nonetheless, her presence at the start reinforces the message of the day.

"I say something like, 'Many of us here have been knocked down by something, but here we are and look at what we can do,'" Meili says. "I have learned that with love and support, there's hope, and from hope, possibility emerges."

On April 19, 1989, Meili was a fast-rising investment banker who went for a run in Central Park shortly after 9 p.m. and became the victim of a savage assault. She was raped, beaten, and dragged into the woods. Discovered five hours later, she had lost 75 percent of her blood, had skull fractures and a crushed left eye socket. Her head was





A FULL RECOVERY

Meili postrace with New York governor David Paterson in 2008 (far left). With her husband when she went public in 2003 (left). Coverage of the 1989 attack (below).

Traum was organizing a race in Central Park. “I had suggested calling it the Trisha Meili Five-Miler,” Traum says. “But she felt it shouldn’t be about her, that it should be about hope and possibility.”

Today, Meili projects humor, strength, and peace. She runs two or three days each week,

three to five miles at a time, alone or with her husband, Jim Schwarz, around their home in Connecticut. She ran the New York City Marathon in 1995 in 4:30. In fact, she jokes, if she hadn’t been in a coma, she would have protested the media calling

her the Central Park Jogger. “To me, the sense of a jogger is that you’re just kind of flitting around,” she says. “I always thought of myself as a runner.”

Running, Meili says, is a meditative time for her, and sometimes she uses it to remind herself of the importance of the present moment. “During my recovery, I wasn’t caught up in what had happened, a past I couldn’t change,” she often tells audiences. “Wallowing in the past or worrying about the future was not going to help. Working in the present was the right place to focus my energy.” **EW**



so swollen, coworkers could identify her only by a ring she wore. “I was one of seven people attacked in the park that night,” Meili says. “New Yorkers thought, *It could have been me.*” Frank Sinatra sent roses; Joan Benoit Samuelson sent Nikes. Dick Traum, president of the Achilles Track Club, which trains athletes with disabilities for participation in athletic events, went to the spot where Meili was attacked. “I’m not religious,” says Traum, “but this was one of the few times in my life when I was praying—I was thinking, *Come on, you can do it.*”

THE LONG ROAD BACK

Meili was on a ventilator and in a coma for 12 days, underwent surgery to repair her eye, and eventually moved to a rehab facility in Connecticut. There she began the process of recovering from brain injury—regaining her ability to tell time, button a blouse, walk, and finally, to run again—with the help of a local Achilles

group. “That compulsion to run was something that led to an incident that almost killed me,” says Meili, who has no memory of the attack. “But it also helped save my life. Doctors said because my heart was so strong, I was able to survive those hours before I was found.”

After the attack, Meili’s doctors, family, and employer guarded her privacy so she could return to a normal life. But eventually, she decided to share what she had learned from her recovery. Meili changed careers, from investment banking to advocacy work, and serves on the boards of the Achilles Track Club and Gaylord Hospital, the facility that treated her. She began giving speeches in the health and sexual-assault advocacy fields, and in 2003, she wrote a memoir called *I Am the Central Park Jogger: A Story of Hope and Possibility*. The book was published just as