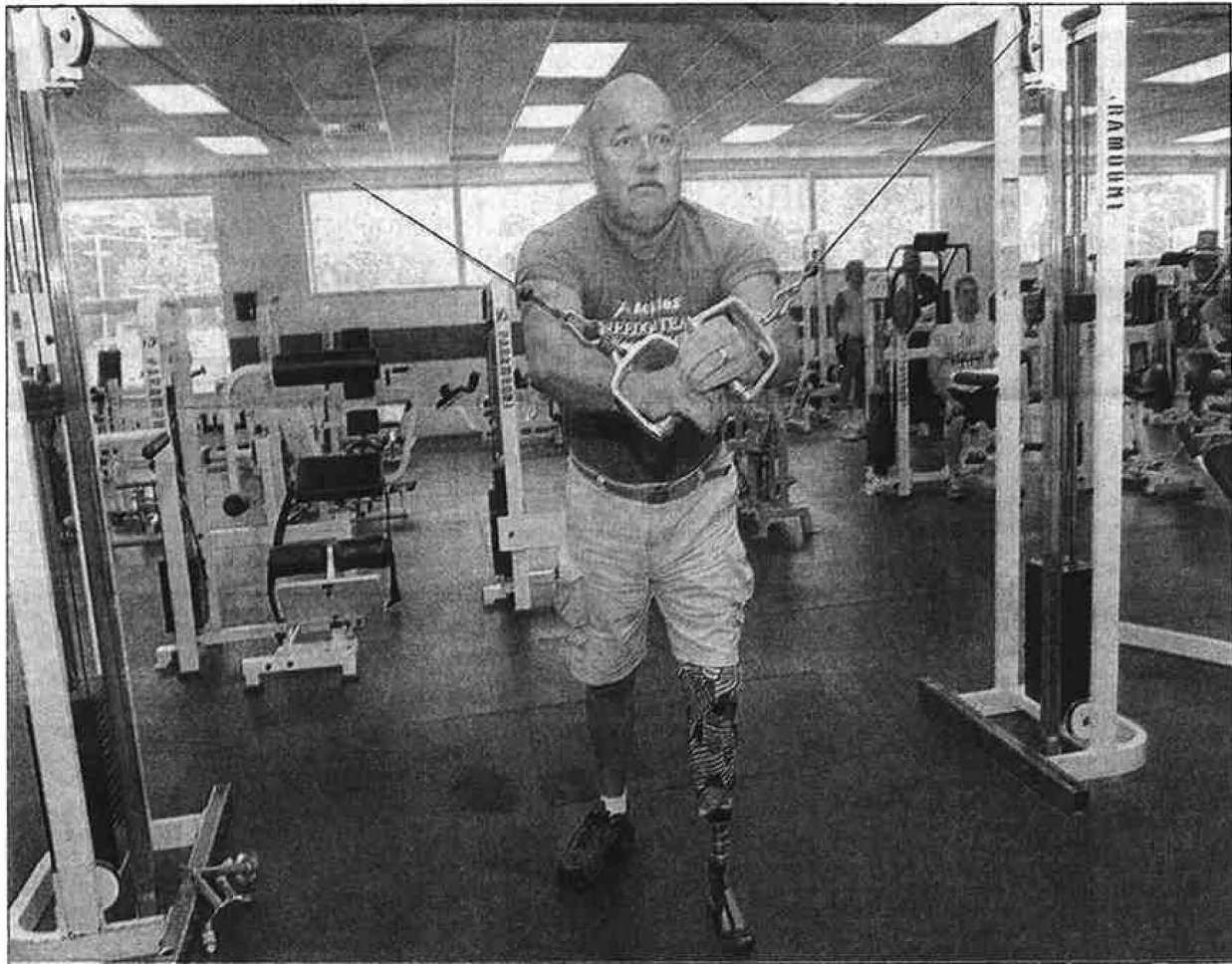


'SHE'S THE REASON I'M WALKING TODAY'



LAWRENCE PIERCE | Sunday Gazette-Mail

Dan O'Connor works on his upper-body strength at the South Charleston Recreation Center gym.

Man loses leg, becomes marathon runner

By Rick Steelhammer
Staff writer

At age 62, Dan O'Connor is in the best physical condition of his life.

He has competed in 14 marathons and half-marathons from Boston to Budapest in the past 18 months, and plans to take up the triathlon.

Last weekend, he set state records in his division in the 100-meter, 200-meter, 400-meter, 800-meter, 1,500-meter, 5-kilometer and 10-kilometer race events, as well as shot put, discus and javelin.

His daily workout routine at the South Charleston Recreation Center includes swimming one mile, then walking 3.5 miles at a brisk pace on a treadmill before spending a couple of hours using resistance machines to boost his upper body strength.

But he never would have become an athlete had a car not collided with his motorcycle nearly four years ago on U.S. 60 in St. Albans, caus-

ing massive injuries to his left leg.

"On that day, two-legged Dan O'Connor died, and one-legged Dan O'Connor stood up," he said.

O'Connor's "good" right leg wasn't all that great before the accident claimed his left leg below the knee. While serving in the Marines in the Vietnam War, the right leg was shattered when O'Connor tripped a "Bouncing Betty" mine, an explosive that detonates after being propelled out of the ground in which it is placed.

"In high school, I was on St. Albans' first cross-country team," said O'Connor. "But after Vietnam, I wasn't much of an athlete. I could get around OK, and I played golf for a while. But I've had fourteen surgeries on my right leg, and I wore a knee brace for eleven years. I couldn't run on it."

A former South Charleston Police Department patrolman and loss prevention director for J.C. Penney, O'Connor said the loss of his leg "had me down for a couple of days. But my attitude for 40 years was that I shouldn't have had my

right leg, anyway, since my best buddy, Steve Roberts of Weirton, lost his leg pulling me out of the minefield."

O'Connor credits his wife, Debbie, with helping him get back on his feet as rapidly, and as solidly, as he did.

"She's my inspiration," he said. "She was beside me every day. She wouldn't let me feel sorry for myself. She's the reason I'm walking today."

While getting used to his new prosthetic leg, Jeremiah Gagnon with CAMC's rehabilitation program talked me into trying wheelchair basketball," O'Connor said. "A couple of guys who were playing basketball also ran long wheelchairs in races, and they got me interested in trying that. I ran a couple of five kilometer races and liked it."

While attending a conference for amputees in Atlanta two years ago, O'Connor met members of the Achilles Track Club's Freedom Team, a group of wounded veterans — mostly amputees

Smiling in jubilation, O'Connor waves a small American flag as he crosses the finish line at the Boston Marathon.

MARATHON

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from combat in Iraq and Afghanistan — who compete in distance races across the nation.

"They approached me about joining the team," O'Connor recalled, "and I said, 'are you sure?' because I didn't lose my leg in Vietnam, and, hey, these guys were all in their 20s and I was 60."

But the St. Albans man met the criteria of being war wounded, an amputee, and ready to compete alongside veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. "I think it helps the younger people to see someone, my age walking around with a prosthesis and doing active things," he said.

Freedom Team members make use of aerodynamic, hand-cranked wheelchairs and participate in more than a dozen marathons or half-marathons annually. More than 200 wounded veterans from across the nation take part in Freedom Team competitions.

In addition to marathons in Minneapolis, Myrtle Beach, Palm Beach and Budapest, Hungary, O'Connor has raced in two New York City Marathons, two Marine Corps Marathons, and in April, the Boston Marathon, where he placed in the top ten in his division. "It's been lose a leg and see the world," O'Connor said with a laugh.

Closer to home, O'Connor competed last week in West Virginia Track and Field Championships for athletes with physical disabilities, an event sanctioned by the U.S. Para-Olympic Committee and Wheelchair Sports USA, where he set state records in the events listed above.

When not on the race circuit, he volunteers as an American

Coalition of Amputees-certified peer visitor for people at Charleston Area Medical Center who have lost limbs.

O'Connor has resumed riding motorcycles, and recently took part in the annual Rolling Thunder ride to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington to honor fallen Vietnam vets.

His leg prosthesis — made of nine layers of carbon fiber — was crafted by Adam Lehotay of Charleston, and has five foot attachments designed for activities ranging from scuba diving to motorcycle riding.

O'Connor said his goal is to compete in 100 marathons or half-marathons by the time he's 70, and to begin competing in triathlon events, using a racing chair on the bicycle segments of the events. "I'm in the best shape I've been in since stepping out of Parris Island" after completing basic training in the Marine Corps, he said.

"If I could reverse what happened with my leg, I wouldn't. Who knows what I'd be doing, otherwise? This way, I get to help these kids. And I get a feeling of accomplishment every time I put on this leg and take off walking."

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Dan O'Connor prepares to board his hand-cranked racing chair for a brief practice run.

