



33rd Free Press Marathon
6:59 A.M. SUNDAY, DETROIT AND WINDSOR

The long road home



LARRY SILLEN/Special to the Free Press

Flint's Nick Koulchar guides his hand-crank wheelchair through New York's Central Park in June. His next race is Sunday.

Wounded vet ready to crank out 26.2 miles

Record field again for marathon

The Detroit Free Press Marathon will have another record field this year. Registration closed at midnight Thursday, so final figures were not available, but race organizers said in the early evening that the field could approach 20,000.

Last year's event attracted 19,393 runners, walkers, wheelers and handcyclists — a 540% increase from the 3,588 participants 10 years ago.

JUST THE FACTS

What: 33rd Detroit Free Press Marathon.

When: 6:59 a.m. Sunday.

Where: Streets of Detroit and Windsor.

Information: Click on freeparathon.com.

By **SHAWN WINDSOR**
FREE PRESS SPORTS WRITER

Nick Koulchar quit college when his father died and wound up scraping asbestos in abandoned buildings in Detroit. He took the work to pay for the mortgage he acquired when he lost his dad. Koulchar had a younger brother, Mike, to guide — his mother left the picture when they were toddlers — and there weren't many options for a 20-year-old community-college dropout.

The Flint-area native managed to hang on for almost four years before youth and poor decisions led to foreclosure. He needed a drastic change.

"The military seemed nice and drastic," Koulchar said.

Some two years later — in September 2008 — Koulchar woke from a two-week coma at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington. His legs were gone. For the next 19 months, representatives with Achilles International's Freedom Team of Wounded Veterans tried to convince Koulchar that tackling a marathon in a hand-crank wheelchair could be a springboard to a new life. For most of those months, the wounded, heavily medicated veteran dismissed the sales pitch.

Then last winter, as his doctors dialed down the pain pills and antidepressants and antianxiety meds, Koulchar began emerging from the haze, and agreed to try the hand-crank.

His first race was in June, through Central Park in New York City. His next race is Sunday, through the streets of Detroit and Windsor, where the 28-year-old will attempt his first marathon in the 33rd Detroit Free Press Marathon.

There are thousands of reasons we pursue 26.2 miles of concrete and pain, and surely most of them will be on display this weekend, surging right alongside Koulchar, a young man rediscovering how to live again.

■ **INSIDE: AN INSPIRING JOURNEY FROM BAGHDAD AND SAGINAW VALLEY STATE. 8B**