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On the Run with the Achilles Track Club

By JEFF KISSELOFF

Dick Traum took off his sweat pants and checked out his right leg. After four marathons, it was none the worse for wear. It looked pink and healthy, and the air valve above the knee worked perfectly, boosting the suction that kept it in place. His artificial leg was a fine one, all right.

With his sweat pants on, Traum looked like any other slightly out-of-shape, middle-aged jogger out in the park for an evening's exercise. With the pants off, he suddenly looked like a man with a lot of strength and courage. Traum just shrugged it off.

"I guess it's the equivalent of having some teeth extracted," he said of the accident 18



Dick Traum, far right, runs with the Achilles Track Club

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years ago that left him with only one leg. Traum expects Griskus will finish in three and a half this year. Millie Bardavid was a polio victim at the age of three. Three weeks ago, she completed her first half marathon in a wheelchair.

Accompanied by his son Joe, 7, and already a daredevil on a two-wheeler, Traum set off on a four-mile run around Central Park last Friday night. Since the club had its genesis in Traum's own experiences, he talked of his life since the accident as he ran in a quick, skipping gait with his comments punctuated every few steps by the shushing sound of the air valve, which he pressed to increase the leg's suction. The valve was a source of fascination for Joe, who was immensely pleased later on when his father let him press it himself.

The conversation was also interrupted by joggers greeting Traum as they passed by with words of encouragement. The attention didn't bother him, he said. Then he laughed and told a story about Pat Griskus and an experience he had in an eight mile race. Griskus got off slowly, and a number of people passed him shouting "God bless you" with more than a hint of condescension. The same people were quite surprised to see Griskus pass them in the last few miles. "He thought about saying 'God bless you' as he passed them, but he decided it would be too cute," Traum said.

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years ago that left him with only one leg. "It's inconvenient, but you don't let it affect your life."

Traum takes that attitude seriously. A behavioral scientist who now runs his own computer business, he is also the co-founder of the Achilles Track Club, a running club for

disabled athletes. The club's membership has grown steadily since its inception nine months ago and now boasts 25 runners. They include Linda Down, a cerebral palsy victim, who

despite being confined to crutches, completed the New York City Marathon last year in 11 hours. Pat Griskus, a 4:28 miler before he lost his leg in a motorcycle accident, ran the Mara-

Achilles

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With one leg broken and the other amputated, Traum was in a cast and then a wheelchair for several months after his accident. When he was finally able to get out on his own, he wasn't feeling sorry for himself. "I spent so much time in a cast and that chair, I was just happy to be free of it," he said. "I just couldn't stand the wheelchair. I just hated it when somebody pushed it." Still, he wasn't getting much exercise, and his physical condition deteriorated markedly.

"I was so sedate that if I walked a couple of blocks it was exercise. I was doing a lot of flying at the time, so much of my exercise came from walking to the check-in counter and then out to the plane. That is some distance when you're walking on an artificial leg."

But the sedentary life came to a sudden halt in the mid-70s, when an acquaintance suffered a heart attack at the age of 35. "We were talking about how ridiculous it was to have a heart attack at that age, so we decided to join an exercise class at the Y."

The class was taught by a running buff named Bob Glover. One of the prerequisites of the course was that everybody had to run. When asked by Glover if he could do it, Traum lied. "I just said 'yes'. I wanted to stay in the class." So he ran. He worked up to two miles on the gym's indoor track. A fear of falling made him afraid to run outdoors, but one day he decided to try it. "We were living on West End Avenue at the time. I ran from there to Third Avenue and 86th Street. I thought it was just fantastic," he said smiling. "I stopped a few times of course, but I had just gone that whole distance on an artificial leg."

He didn't stop there. Several weeks later, he entered his first race, a five-miler in Central Park. This time, he finished without resting.

"I was afraid to," he said laughing again. "At that time, I was naive enough to think that if I stopped, I would be disqualified. It was a hot day, too, and there were no water stops. I went over to a vendor to get a piece of ice, and I was really worried. But I finished the



Dick Traum gets ready for a run with help from son, Joe.

race, and it was the thrill of a lifetime."

After the first race, a terrible thing happened he added with a grin. He saw an advertisement for a 10 kilometer race. He knew he could do it. "That was it. I got sucked in," he said. Several months later, he did his first marathon in a little over seven hours. He has done three others. But it was the first one that he wanted to talk about, not for his own achievement but because it led to the formation of the track club and inadvertently helped create a national hero in the process.

About three months after the race, a picture of him appeared in *Runner's World Magazine*. The photo was spotted by a young Canadian named Terry Fox, who was about to lose a leg to cancer. The picture inspired Fox to take up running after his amputation. Three years later, Fox began his historic cross-Canada run to raise money for cancer research. Fox didn't live to complete the trip, but his courage inspired such an outpouring of love that \$30 million was raised and he became perhaps Canada's greatest national hero.

After his death, Terry Fox long distance runs sprang up all over Canada. Traum par-

ticipated in a number of them along with other disabled runners. "I saw lots of people who were amputees and lots of people in wheelchairs. I just figured there were all these people in Toronto, why didn't they have it in New York. I said to Fred Lebow (head of the New York Road Runners Club) 'Hey. Let's set up a program for disabled runners.' He said, 'Do it.'"

So along with Bob Glover, Traum designed an eight-week program with two classes a week. They had T-shirts and sneakers, everything but runners, and that wasn't easy. Traum went through the Road Runner's club mailing list and wrote to members who were physicians or were in hospital related work. He asked them to put out word of the new program. The response wasn't encouraging. "Actually, it was terrible," said Traum. Out of 1,100 letters, we got three responses."

But Traum doesn't give up easily. He literally took to the streets to find runners. "It worked. One by one people would hear about it. We would be walking on the street and we'd see someone who was disabled, and we'd say, 'Hey. How about joining up.' Somebody

would see someone in a wheelchair and would approach him. Another time, one of my employees saw an amputee walking in Bryant Park and said 'How about joining.' Millie Bardavid never heard of it, and she was living across the street from the club when someone saw her."

The exercise program was such a success that the runners didn't want it to end. So the Achilles Track Club was born. "Bob Glover came up with the name," said Traum. "The only weak spot on Achilles' body was his heel, and I guess that's the way we see ourselves. Our bodies are perfect except for that one weak spot." Then he laughed. "I guess I'll never get an Achilles Heel. Or at least the possibility of my getting one is about 50 percent."

As he ran, Joe scooted ahead on his bicycle as he had for most of the evening. Only this time, the hills were a bit much for his legs. "I can't make it Dad," he said. "I'm tired."

"You can do it, Joe. It's not so bad," his father replied kindly but firmly. "When we get to the West Side, I'll push you up the hill."

Traum talked some more about the club, which meets in the park every Wednesday night. "What is great fun for me is when I see some great improvement in people. Millie ran the half-marathon. You see here there, and there's a glow radiating from her."

The 25 runners in the club include kids from the Ronald McDonald House who are undergoing chemotherapy. The club has lost some of those kids, but Traum thinks the running helps them. "Chemotherapy is such a debilitating thing. It just weakens your system. So instead of laying around in bed, they are getting some fresh air and exercise, and it has to build up their resistance to the side effects. I think five years from now running will be a major part of chemotherapy treatment," he said.

Traum would like to see the membership grow to around 100. He would also like to see the club branch out to other cities. "I'd also like to get started on some basic research, to see what people with disabilities can do."

The run was about over. Joe was having a hard time navigating the last hills. Suddenly his bicycle wobbled too close to the sidewalk, and he went down in a heap. Traum watched as he fell to make sure he was all right. But he made no effort to pick him up. Joe was going to be as self sufficient as his Dad. □

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