

Runner's World Exclusive

It Took the Courage and Willpower of a Thousand Champions for Linda Down Just To Finish the NYC Marathon

The world has few heroes. But on Oct. 24, 1982, it chose one from the 16,000 participants in the New York City Marathon. No, it wasn't Alberto Salazar or Grete Waitz, but rather a shy and self-effacing 25-year-old woman who finished the 26.2-mile footrace dead last in just more than 11 hours. She was on crutches.

Linda Down was born with cerebral palsy. But she is not one to let her disability keep her down. "I've been on crutches so long I don't really think of myself as disabled," she says. Indeed, Down graduated magna cum laude from Pace University and holds a master's degree in social work from Adelphi. She applied the same sort of dedication to running the New York City Marathon.

Runner's World somehow managed to get through and sent New York Editor Bill Dunnett to interview her. Down lives only a few blocks from Dunnett in midtown Manhattan. She shares an apartment with her twin sister, Laura, who also has cerebral palsy. Their apartment is tastefully decorated, with some stunning framed photographs on the wall of New York City past and present. On the mantle above the fireplace, nestled among bouquets of flowers, is a small, wrapped package bearing the gold Seal of the President of the United States. "There's jelly beans inside," Down explained. "But the wrapping is so beautiful, I just can't open it up."

Only five days after her marathon effort, Linda Down was still exhausted — both from the race itself and the deluge of unexpected attention that has followed it. She enjoyed talking about her experiences but seemed somewhat bewildered by the fuss.

Runner's World: You've had cerebral palsy since birth and you're forced to use crutches while walking. Whatever gave you the idea to run the New York City Marathon?

Down: It just entered my head to do it. My sister Laura and I were watching last year's marathon on TV and she jokingly said, "Hey, let's run in the marathon next year!" I had started an exercise program about a month earlier to lose weight, increase my metabolism and gain better flexibility and muscle tone. I had started with just situps and as I gained strength, I thought about doing some running — I'm used to being on crutches and I move quickly anyway. So I went to my doctor and just asked if I'm physically able to run. He said he thought I could, but that I should just first try a couple miles in a race and see how that went. I entered the L'eggs Mini Marathon in May and finished the 6.2 miles in two hours.

RW: What did you feel, being in a race and on crutches?

Down: I really loved it. I thought the people were fantastic. Part of my anxiety was that I didn't feel like a runner and I felt awkward being there. It was raining and I was standing in the back of the pack on crutches and with my sister's raincoat on. But everyone was very supportive and there was no negative reaction like, "What are you doing here?" So when I finished I felt I could take on the New York City Marathon.



Linda Down (far left) has become a hero after a courageous effort in the NYC Marathon, and joined Alberto Salazar and Grete Waitz at the White House.

RW: What was your training program like?

Down: I really had no idea that I could actually finish a marathon. But I thought I'd just try to do the best I could. I just increased my exercise program. I've had surgery on both knees and I have a pin in my right hip, so I have to think in terms of stretching the muscles around my hips and keeping my groin muscles loose and stretching the muscles around the knees. Those are my weak points and my hip is usually the first to give out. I try to prep myself by getting those muscles in condition with specific stretches. After the L'eggs Mini Marathon, I added running twice a week.

RW: So you just started running.

Down: I figured the race would be with 16,000 other people so I'd better get used to crowds — I was wrong, I found out later — so I ran on the sidewalks during rush hour and lunch time. Weaving in and out, I thought, would get me used to the commotion I expected during the race. I tried adding a mile to my program each time out. One run was 18 miles; it took me about seven hours. I ran from my apartment, up Fifth Avenue to Mt. Sinai Hospital

on 105th Street. It's about three miles up there from here, so I just kept going back and forth, back and forth, from the late afternoon into the evening.

RW: What about rain?

Down: I never ran when it rained only because I figured I'd catch pneumonia and never recover in time to run the marathon. I do have rubber tips on the bottom of my crutches and that helps in the rain.

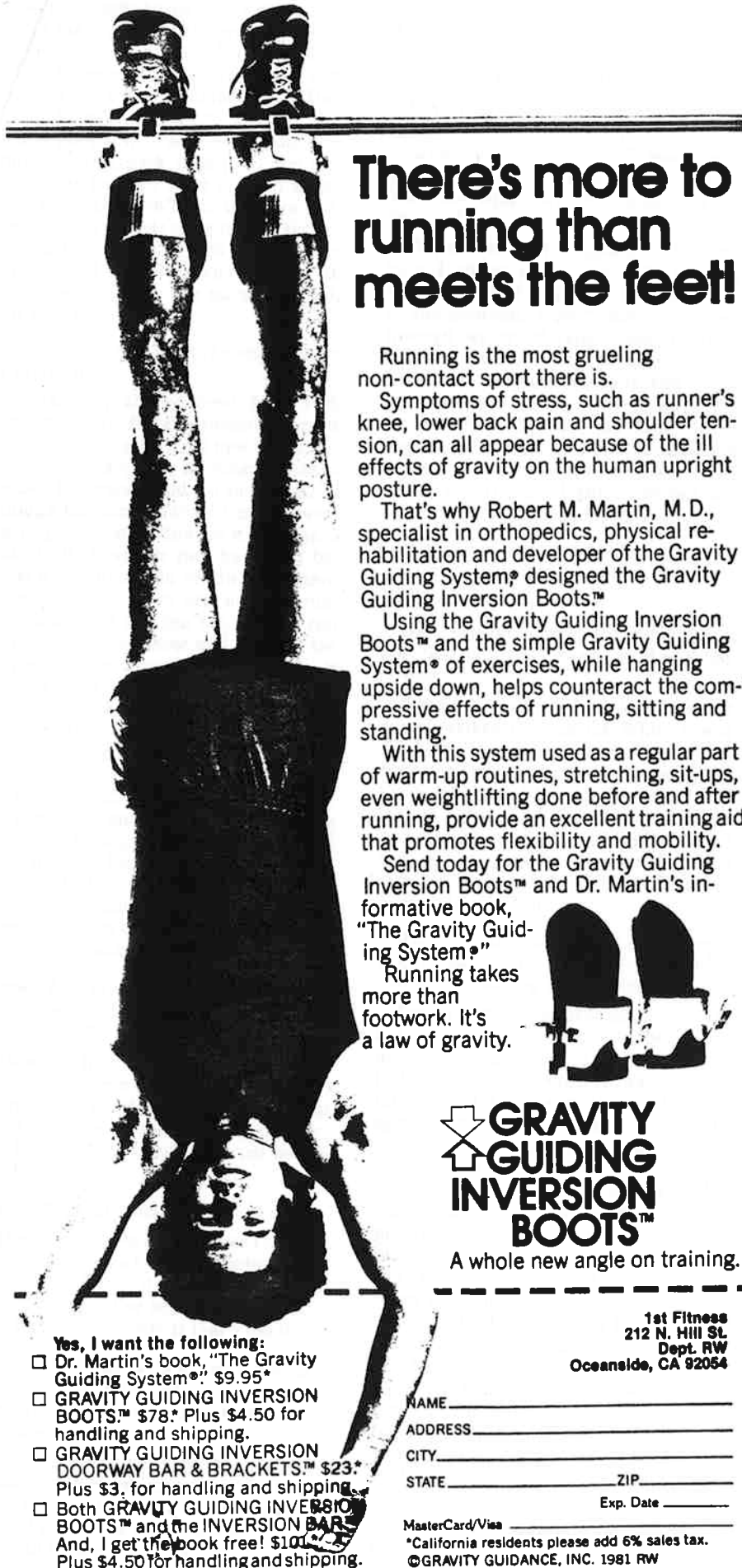
RW: You have special crutches called "Canadian canes."

Down: They're not really special. Some people have the image of crutches that support you under the arms, like the kind you use if you break your leg. The crutches I use have a metal cup on the forearm and you have to grip a handle. They're not specially built, but they're different.

RW: New Yorkers are pretty blasé about just about everything. But a girl running back and forth on the sidewalks during rush hour on crutches must have raised some eyebrows.

Down: I guess it's sort of incongruous to see someone in a sweat suit on crutches. You can walk down the streets with green hair and not get much attention. New Yorkers in general don't pay much attention to these things, so most people either didn't pay any attention or just did a double take and said, "Are you jogging or is my brain gone?" Most people, if they said anything, would say "Keep going," or "You're doing fine." When the marathon was getting close, some people would come up and say that they knew someone who's training for the marathon and I'd say, "I am too." They looked at me a little funny.

RW: So you entered the New York City Marathon. Were you discouraged at all by race officials who may not want to have disabled people in the race?



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Down: To tell you the truth, I never told them I was on crutches until the last minute and by then it was too late for them to do anything. I had heard that there was a lot of uproar about letting wheelchairs in the race and I didn't know what their reaction to me would be. I wanted to be in it so badly, I didn't want to take any chances. And I would have never told them at all if I didn't have to know how long it would be until the traffic came back on the streets so I could plan when I had to take to the sidewalks. I also had to know when to get behind the starting line because I didn't want to be trampled to death.

RW: Probably the only other person in the country to have completed a marathon on crutches is Jerry Traylor of Parkersburg, W. Va. He says that Fred Lebow discouraged him from running New York.

Down: I met Jerry just before the start of the race. He was the only other person on crutches. I thought there might be some more and I was surprised there was just the two of us. I thought, "There's nobody else?" How did he do?

RW: He had to drop out at 16 miles because all the water stops had been closed and he was dehydrating.

Down: My family met me up at mile 15 and drove alongside and gave me water. I also had a small canteen of water with me and I brought money with me so I could go into a deli and buy a Tab or something.

RW: I've seen Jerry tape his hands before a race. Do you have anything to protect yourself from the friction of the crutches?

Down: I wore leather gloves because I got blisters on my palms during the L'eggs Mini Marathon. Even so, my hands were still very swollen the day after the marathon. Also, I wish I had thought to protect my forearms. They're black and blue now — it looks like somebody beat me up.

RW: Did you have trouble on the bridges with the metal grating?

Down: By the time I got to the Queensboro Bridge, they had taken up the carpet and I had to go very carefully over the grating. You can really have a bad fall there.

RW: What was the most difficult part of the race?

Down: The first couple of miles were the hardest. I was going uphill over the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge and the wind was very, very hard. When I came off the bridge I felt exhausted and I thought, "Oh my God, I've only gone three miles." And I was still fighting the wind. But by the time I got to mile 10, the wind had died down and it felt much easier. I only really expected to get to mile 15 and anything after that was an act of God.

RW: Literally an act of God?

Down: At mile 10 the ABC camera crew joined me and asked if they could go a couple of miles with me. They ended up going 16.2 miles. If I didn't have that support, if I was left alone in the dark in Harlem looking for a blue line, I would have said, "Forget it, I'm going home." It started getting dark at 6 p.m. and you start going through some difficult neighborhoods. You can't see the blue line. And I have a terrible sense of direction — I would have thought, "Oh my God, I'm going to end up in Pittsburgh." So it almost seemed like it was an act of God, that they were brought.

RW: What was it like to be on your own in Brooklyn?

Down: I've always loved New York City, its vitality. But experiencing it on the street level was something new to me. I'd never really traveled to the other boroughs besides Manhattan and I'd never walked through the communities. I could savor the neighborhoods. You see it on an intimate level. I ran the race by myself because by the time I got off the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, there were no other runners in sight. It was just me. For the rest of the race I was alone and most of the throngs of spectators were gone, too. It was like being in training again. And when the streets opened to traffic, I was back on the sidewalks. But the thing that stands out in my mind was the supportiveness of the people on the street who were aware of my running and cheered me on. I remember coming up one street and a little group of people were gathered outside a bar. I guess they had been watching TV and they were aware that I was coming. They all started to applaud and shout, "You can keep going, you can do it." That specialness is what makes the marathon.

RW: Was anyone waiting for you at the finish line? Did the NYRRC know you were coming?

Down: They didn't think there was anyone out there. There were about 40 people from Road Runners taking things down and one person took my number, but I don't think they considered me official.

RW: Was the clock still going?

Down: I was told my time was 11:00:57, so I guess the clock was still going. But I still don't know if I was an official finisher or not. I've heard mixed reports. The fact of the matter is that I did it.

RW: Well, the NYRRC may not have paid you much attention but you certainly seem to have gotten plenty from almost everyone else.

Down: I guess because I didn't run the marathon with publicity in mind, it kind of overwhelmed me. I did it because I wanted to run the race. I knew ABC was going to do a piece on me, but I put that

out of my mind and just counted down the miles. The first time someone called out my name in Brooklyn I thought, "I don't know anyone in Brooklyn!"

RW: That was just the beginning. ABC has gotten calls from all over the country, Road Runners has gotten calls and letters, you were pictured on the front page of *The New York Times* and invited to the White House.

Down: I know I've gotten — oh, God have I gotten phone calls. My training now consists of running from the phone to the doorbell. I can't sleep. I just go through waves of fatigue and I think, "What was the number of that truck?" It's funny, because basically I'm a shy person and I didn't want to open my mouth too much before the race. I didn't want to tell everyone I'm in the marathon and then not finish. I just told my family and a few friends. I guess I'm just not aware of what's happened yet.

RW: Have other cerebral palsy victims contacted you since the race?

Down: Not yet, no.

RW: One day you're an unknown and the next you're invited to the White House.

Down: I was in a daze for the entire day. I walked through the White House thinking, "I wish I could savor this." But they kept moving me through halls and "turn left" and "turn right" and "come into this room." I kept meeting people and shaking hands. Everything's a blur. I was very nervous but the president was very nice and cordial. I felt a little calmer after we'd said hello.

RW: As a disabled person and a social worker, didn't you have ambivalent feelings about meeting Ronald Reagan?

Down: Yes. The present administration has made cutbacks across the board for union services, which is something that had troubled me when I was initially invited. But I felt even though I didn't agree with the man's politics, I could swallow my own politics and go. It's an honor to be invited to the White House no matter whose administration is in. But I went because I don't believe disabled people are represented as people with the same feelings and aspirations as everyone else. You only see disabled people on telethons and other fund-raising type things, but never in the day-to-day kinds of activities that everyone else does. The image you have is not of the person, but of the disability. So I thought if I can be seen to promote a positive image for the disabled by going, if I could make a positive statement, then it would be worth it. It was a trade-off and I had to make a decision. It wasn't easy.

RW: Jerry Traylor says that people tell him all the time that he's got a lot of cour-

age to run in races. But he says courage has nothing to do with it. Running just allows him to go out and do the things he wants to do rather than be confined all the time. This way he can do things on his own will.

Down: I feel uncomfortable when people tell me I'm courageous. To me, there's no other choice. If I had the choice of sitting in my apartment and looking at four walls or going out and doing something that I wanted to do, I'd simply go out and do it. All my life I've enjoyed trying things and doing things. I love adventure and I love challenges. Anyone faced with the same circumstances would probably do the same thing. So I don't think of myself as courageous.

RW: You don't seem like you'd let too many things get in the way of something you'd like to accomplish.

Down: I've been on crutches so long I don't really think of myself as disabled.

RW: You don't like being called courageous, but for many people you're a hero.

Down: I don't know if I'm a hero. I guess if I am it's because of a scarcity of hopefulness right now. We're going through such a negative time that when people see something that reawakens some hope in them, they focus a lot of attention on it. Perhaps if we lived in more hopeful times, my achievement wouldn't be held in such stark contrast. If people want to think of me as a hero that's OK. We don't really have many heroes, especially women heroes. Most women who gain notoriety have been manufactured by Hollywood or the media. They're not people who have achieved anything — public relations people put them together. I wasn't manufactured — I wasn't a starlet out looking for publicity. What I did was reality. I did it myself.

RW: I know you're working part time on a film script and at the same time trying to job hunt. Has the experience of the last week changed your career goals?

Down: There are two things that I love — writing and social work. I'd like to combine the two or I might choose one over the other. But I feel I've been knocked off balance in the past week. I was caught off guard and everything's up in the air. So I'm trying to make some decisions. Some rehabilitation hospitals have called and asked me to speak, which is something I'd enjoy doing.

RW: I suppose the least of your worries right now is finding another marathon to run.

Down: I'd like to continue my running routine of doing a couple miles once or twice a week. I know I want to run shorter races, but whether I want to run another marathon is something else. □