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SECTION

Racers' Club, Speed Is Just One of the Lessons Learn



The New York Times/Susan Farley

aching Keith Givens, center, and Andre
ne New York City Marathon on Sunday.

By IRA ROSENBLUM

LIKE most other first-time competitors in the New York City Marathon, Andre Donegan and Keith Givens have been busy preparing for the race, working out four times a week, increasing their distance in anticipation of Sunday's grueling 26.2-mile course.

But unlike most other racers, Andre, 16 years old, was born without arms or legs, and Keith, 17, has cerebral palsy. They will be racing in wheelchairs; it will be the first time that handicapped public school students compete in the marathon.

The boys, 10th graders at Francis Lewis High School in Queens, are members of the Achilles Track Club, a racing team for the disabled, which recently established chapters in the city's elementary and secondary schools.

"When I first joined the club, the marathon was the farthest thing from my mind," Andre said recently. "But I'm confident I'll finish the race, even if it takes me six months."

The club was introduced in the schools by Dick Traum, its founder, who was invited by the Board of Education's Division of Adapted Physical Education to give workshops for teachers and handicapped students last November. In 1978, Mr.

Traum, who lost a leg in an accident, became the first amputee to run the New York City Marathon.

"Dick showed a film of him running the marathon," said Irv Bader, head of the division. "The kids had no idea it was even possible."

The first chapters in elementary and junior high schools were established last February. Initially, 120 students joined. The number has since grown to 300 at 12 schools in all five boroughs. The disabilities range from blindness to spina bifida; any handicapped student is eligible.

Teaching students to run bolsters their self-esteem, Mr. Traum said. "If they develop a positive outlook early on," he said, "they are better equipped to face challenges later."

At first, the students set modest goals, instructed by physical education teachers specially trained to work with handicapped people, the children run for 20 minutes. When that target is reached, they enter two-mile, then four-mile races in Central Park. For their accomplishments, they are given T-shirts, running shoes and sometimes medals.

The students work out several times a week at school and, on Saturday mornings, with adult Achilles members in Central Park.

"So much of their lives they hear about what they cannot do," Mr. Traum said. "Now they start seeing

what they can do."

The club provides transportation and takes care of other things, including racing fees and running shoes. "We didn't want anyone to have money as an excuse," Mr. Traum said.

The students also participate in races alongside able-bodied runners. "It's a wonderful vehicle for mainstreaming," Mr. Traum said. "A disabled kid who is trained to run can go a longer distance than an able-bodied youngster who is not trained. It's like a metaphor for life."

Andre and Keith are among the few exceptional racers who decided to enter the marathon. (Athletes must be at least 16 to enter.)

"It sounded like it would be a good experience," Andre said, "and the chance to meet a lot of people."

The boys began training in the spring, going about 2 miles. After four months, their mileage increased to 12. "At first the hills were hard," Keith said. "But now I'm used to it."

Training presented other challenges. Padded gloves had to be designed to prevent the wheels of Andre's chair from burning the skin on the stumps of his arms, which he uses to turn the wheels. Keith did not own a sports chair, a lightweight but expensive version needed by wheelchair racers. That problem was solved by a donation from the Eastern Paralyzed

Veterans Association.

According to Mr. Traum, it was the first time that a boy will compete in a marathon. "The boys' coach, Mr. Traum, added, "Andre can ball better than arms."

Ms. Slatas, a physical education teacher, is one of the few who will run alongside the marathon, to inspire the boys. "The boys are in a race, Andre admits he cannot wait to probably be scared all the people. I'm concentrate on the about everything else."

After the race they will focus on again. They both want Andre to study law come a computer course.

Andre and Keith see themselves as heroes. I think their participation will open doors for capped children. My kids at school.

"Some of them are until they're old enough. This has given appreciation for. "It's given them a