



# Interview: Dick Traum

## Q & A with the President of Achilles International

Conducted by Lorraine Cancro, MSW

Achilles is an international organization with a mission of encouraging people with all types of disabilities to participate in mainstream sports focusing on long distance running. It promotes health, well being, socialization, mainstreaming, and achievement

**EP:** Tell us about the members of Achilles International?

**Dick Traum (DT):** If you have seen disabled athletes participating in a marathon, the chances are that they are members of Achilles. We have members in over 70 countries and 100 locations throughout the United States. The typical disabilities of Achilles members include amputation, cerebral palsy, paraplegia, organ transplants, and traumatic brain injury. Many of our most recent members were wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**EP:** Tell us about yourself...

**DT:** In 1965, while standing behind my car at a gas station on the New Jersey Turnpike, a second car hit me from behind and crushed my legs. The right one became infected and was amputated above the knee. In 1975, a friend about my age had a heart attack, and another acquaintance suggested my joining the YMCA inasmuch as, like our mutual acquaintance, I was overweight and working many, many hours in a stressful situation. Because it was never mentioned, he was surprised to find that my limp wasn't

associated with being overweight but with having an artificial leg.

When asked if I could run, my response was "Sure." A hop and a skip sort of worked. Over a period of several months, I improved from being able to jog a couple of hundred yards to a full mile, and soon afterwards, two miles. For an above-the-knee amputee in the mid 1970's, this was very, very exciting. I became involved with the West Side YMCA Running Club, and by May 1976, ran a five mile race. My first marathon was on October 24, 1976, and it was the first New York City Five-Borough Marathon. A picture of me appeared in the January 1977 edition of *Runner's World* and was given to a young Canadian by the name of Terry Fox. He had osteogenic sarcoma and was about to lose his leg. His basketball coach showed him the picture as an example of what one could do after an amputation. Terry's reaction was that if "that old guy could run a marathon," he could run one every day. Following the surgery and recuperation, he set out to run across Canada completing a marathon every day. 3,300 miles later, he became Canada's most celebrated hero and had raised millions for cancer research. Unfortunately, the can-



cer returned and he died in June 1981. That September there was an invitation to Toronto to participate in "Terry Fox Races" in order to resume the fundraising effort. I volunteered again in 1982 and saw many people with disabilities either participating or cheering.

As a board member of the New York Road Runners Club, I suggested to our president, Fred Lebow, that we begin a program to introduce people with disabilities to our sport of running. At the end of the 8 week course we changed the focus to a running club, which was named after the Greek God Achilles.

**EP:** Can you tell us about Trisha Meili's affiliation with Achilles?

**DT:** In 1989, Trisha Meili, who is better known as the Central Park Jogger, was left for dead after being accosted by a gang of teenagers in Central Park. She joined Achilles during her rehabilitation, became a member, ran a 4-hour New York City Marathon, and joined the Achilles board. After becoming our founding board chair, she wrote a book called *I Am The Central Park Jogger: A Story of Hope and Possibility*. The title of her book generated a major Achilles program, which is a five-mile race called "The Hope and Possibility." It attracts several thousand runners to Central Park with the theme of able-bodied individuals and people with disabilities running together in a mainstream situation. The race is currently being replicated throughout the United States in places such as Madison, Wisconsin; Cincinnati, Ohio; Atlanta, Georgia; and the first Hope and Possibility Marathon will be held in early 2011 in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. As Trisha and others with traumatic brain injuries (TBI) ran with Achilles, they saw improvements in cognitive functioning and social interactions.

**EP:** Tell us about your Freedom Team of Wounded Veterans.

**DT:** A third program within Achilles is called the Freedom Team of Wounded Veterans. In 2004, Mary Bryant and I visited Walter Reed Army Medical Center as the first not-for-profit to supplement the

rehabilitation process for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. It was an honor for me to introduce myself to young men and women weeks out of Iraq and Afghanistan, who were typically amputees. I would ask, as they were learning to stand and walk on artificial legs, if they were running the New York City Marathon in November. After expressions one would expect from a *Twilight Zone* episode, they would typically say, "Sir, I just lost my leg three weeks ago and can't even walk." My reaction was to introduce them to a handcrank workout in the early afternoon. Months later, they were competing in marathons. It gave them first, the opportunity to achieve; second, an opportunity to focus on their physical strength and athletic skills; and finally, the joy of once again being part of a team. The program has grown to over 400 wounded veterans. It also has expanded into an additional program called The Marathon Tour. This is a series of 14 marathons throughout the United States and abroad in which people with disabilities can compete with the general public. The Boston Marathon on April 19, 2010 is an example. We had a group of approximately 30 disabled athletes, 12 of whom represented our Walter Reed team. They flew from Washington to Boston, competed, and the following day returned, medals around their necks, to Walter Reed, providing a buzz for the hospital and a cele-

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bration of the great work their therapists and doctors have succeeded in doing. There is a tremendous thrill in working with this group. Typically, you will meet a new member a few weeks after being wounded and the soldier is frail and listless. Several months later, we are working with a bold veteran who is full of excitement and fun. You like to feel that part of this tremendous change has to do somewhat with our program. We are literally addicting these athletes to achievement and we are increasing their levels of aspiration. In effect, many would agree that it is fun to accomplish the impossible. Isolation is a big part of depression and Achilles gets returning veterans up, out, and working out with other Achilles members. This offers them a source of support and community as they reintegrate into mainstream society from military environs. I believe this contributes greatly to

their sense of well-being and confidence.

**EP:** What can you tell us about your international outreach program?

**DT:** Our international program, with members in over 70 countries, has helped people with disabilities come out of the shadows. Typically, 200 members from 30-35 countries compete and celebrate during the weekend of the New York City Marathon. It is not without anxiety and surprise. We have blind athletes who sometimes are too fast for their volunteers and will attempt to “hitch” a ride with a faster runner passing by. Then there were cases where there are last-minute changes. In one situation, a wheelchair athlete and guide who started early got to the top of the 59th Street Bridge. The wheelchair took off downhill leaving the volunteer a quarter of a mile behind. As he raced up First Avenue, trying to catch her, people applauded like crazy. He was unable to explain to the thou-

sands of admirers that he was just a guide trying to catch up with his athlete.

**EP:** Where is your largest and most advanced chapter?

**DT:** Our largest and most advanced chapter is in New York. We have twice weekly workouts in Central Park and monthly races. Achilles has affiliated with several organizations in different ways. We have a pilot program being conducted with Beth Israel focusing on running and walking for people who are diabetic. We are working with rehabilitation centers such as the Rusk Institute and Helen Hayes Hospital. We are competing in different sports including wheelchair basketball, tandem biking, triathlons, wheelchair tennis, and kayaking.

**EP:** What do you still hope to achieve with Achilles?

**DT:** There are four main goals. The first is to increase the number of chapters throughout the United States and to encourage Achilles members in different locations to develop formal chapters. Ideally, we should have chapters in every city with a population of over one-half a million. Second, we need to increase the number of Hope and Possibility Races throughout the United States and the world. The Hope and Possibility Race can eventually be the focal point for our chapters. Third, there are literally thousands of recently wounded veterans who can get tremendous joy out of participating. We would like to increase the Freedom Team to at least 5,000 people and to introduce our program to older veterans. Part of the focus would be on older veterans with diabetes. Finally, we would like to conduct more research focusing on how running can help people with traumatic brain injuries. Through our program at Rusk seven people with very severe traumatic brain injuries have completed the marathon. What is particularly interesting is that each one has a profoundly more positive outlook and important new friendships. •

*For more about Achilles International please visit <http://www.achillesinternational.org>.*