

The Achilles International Kayak Program paddling for all

By Gary Williams, Program Manager

Achilles International is an organization focused on providing access to competitive sports for disabled athletes. Founded in 1983 by Dick Traum, the first amputee to run the marathon distance in the 1976 NYC Marathon, it has since grown to 70 chapters worldwide and a membership of over 60,000.

The Achilles International Kayak Program was founded several years ago as an alternate program to the mainstream road race events Achilles participates in. Initially, the objective was singular: to enter the annual Mayor's Cup race and circumnavigate Manhattan, alongside some of the best open water paddlers to be found. A notable objective for anyone! Behind this effort was Dick Traum, founder of Achilles International and a keen kayaker himself. Achilles have competed in all Mayor's Cup races since 2006 and this year's event being our best showing with 5 Achilles teams lining up at the 79th Street start for the marathon race.

I got involved with the Program in 2009 through Mark Ceconi, an accomplished paddler from Ridgefield, CT and occasional surf ski training partner of mine. Mark had paddled with Achilles the previous year and introduced me to the team as a potential guide. I was immediately taken with the opportunity to both compete in the Mayor's Cup and share my unbound love for paddle sports with this incredible community of athletes.

Unfortunately, in 2009, the event was restricted due to severe weather conditions; however our team of Michael Blair and Marcus Demuth completed the race successfully and in fact beat all other tandem boats outright! Although I did not paddle that year I was inspired by this to stay involved and help move the Program to the next level, beyond a single event to a complete seasonal program of multiple races and broader participation.

2010 has been a developmental season; recruiting athletes and guides, fund raising, acquiring equipment, (we now own 2 Current Design Unity doubles and paddling gear), and most importantly, learning what does and does not work for our teams in these distance events. Each team is unique according to the needs of the Achilles athlete and we have learned to be very creative at times! We have drawn on several paddling names from the NE region and with their pooled experience and enthusiasm, built a real foundation for growth.

Our season did not start until the late spring. So this year we competed in three regional open water events: the Bear Mountain Challenge (14 miles), the Mayor's Cup (28 miles) and most recently the Lighthouse to Lighthouse Race in Westport (14 miles). All these events are long and technical and present a real athletic challenge for our teams. This is exactly in line with the objectives of the Achilles organization; to enter mainstream events and compete alongside able bodied and even elite athletes over the same course and distance, under the same race conditions. This is how Dick Traum started the organization, being the first amputee to compete in the marathon distance in the 1976 NYC event. Competing on an equal footing provides an incredible sense of accomplishment for our athletes, but also, and as importantly, demonstrates to

all involved and spectators alike, that disabled athletes need just an opportunity to prove their abilities, just like the rest of us.

If you are interested in helping the Achilles International Kayak Program either as a business or individual sponsor, or are interested in being a guide for an event please contact me at gwilliams@achillesinternational.org

Top: John Devine and Gary Williams.

Bottom: 2010 L2L Race participants

photos courtesy of Achilles International

