

NEW YORK CITY MARATHON

Disabled veterans get a chance to race

By DANIEL MARRIN

Melynda Baker is a regular visitor to amputees at Army medical centers. She comes to the soldiers with an offer few of them would expect.

“When I go up to amputees in the hospital and ask them if they want to run a marathon, they look at me like I’m on drugs,” she said. However, her offer becomes a lot more credible when they find out she is an amputee like them and a champion wheelchair marathon racer.

Baker, 38, is a recruiter with the Achilles Freedom Team, a nationwide group that trains and equips disabled veterans for marathons. The Freedom Team is the veterans’ branch of the Achilles Track Club, a 24-year-old organization for disabled racers that is now represented in 60 countries. Their racers include not only amputees, but those who are paralyzed, blind, deaf, or suffering from any other disability.

Longtime volunteer Dan Daly says that what distinguishes the Achilles team is their ability to give the disabled the will to race. “We tell them get out of that bed, get out of that psych ward, put on that prosthetic device, get up and live your life again,” Daly said.

The Freedom Team now has 306 active marathon racers around the country, who race multiple marathons every year. Twenty-four of them raced at New York in November. Some who were there had already raced at Washington’s Marine Corps Marathon, and others were already planning to follow the New York race with December’s Palm Beach Marathon.

The racers include Marine Corps, Navy and Army veterans, some injured in combat and others here at home. They typically use hand-crank wheelchair bikes or low-to-the-ground bikes that depend on upper body motion for speed and allow a comfortable fit for the amputees.

Each one of their members was found by the track club and told they had the potential to race. The Freedom Team’s founder, Mary Bryant, began her journey accompanying her paralyzed brother through the New York marathon. She soon began training other wheelchair-bound athletes for competition and eventually turned her focus towards veteran amputees. Her credibility as a leader increased when she was diagnosed with breast cancer, overcame it, and returned to marathon racing.

Melynda Baker had dreams of being a competitive cyclist, but in 2001 a car accident took her left leg below the knee. She spent the next three years in the hospital fighting for her life with a severe staph infection. After her recovery, she was 110 pounds

overweight, but at an amputee convention in 2004, she met Mary Bryant, whose story inspired her to train.

“After losing my leg, I knew I had to do something. I had to find something to do,” she said. Baker trained from August to November and competed in the New York Marathon in 2004. She has since raced in 15 marathons over the last four years and won first place for women wheelchair racers at the Miami, Los Angeles and Detroit marathons. In the process, she became a coach and recruiter for the team, bringing in many soldiers from the Iraq war.

Army Infantryman Rico Roman, 26, had never been in a marathon before. He entered Walter Reed Medical Center in early 2007 after an improvised explosive device, or I.E.D., in Iraq cut off muscle use in his legs. Roman met a recruiter who was getting a team ready for New York. Eager to be physical, Roman asked if he could join them. A last-minute cancellation gave him a chance, and he got his wife and children on the road to New York with him.

Roman came in sixth in his age bracket among wheelchair racers, far ahead of what he had expected. Afterwards, he was exhausted and says he loved the crowds and kids giving him high-fives on his bike. His wife was elated and said, “He was physical before the injury, and I’m just glad he’s physical again.” Roman is planning to race New York again next year.

Baker crashed her bike at a sharp turn on the course around mile 20. Though she was unhurt, the bike was no longer usable, so she was brought by van to the finish line. When asked how she felt about the race’s outcome, Baker shrugged her shoulders and smiled. “You race another day,” she said.

The Palm Beach race was just weeks away.