



**Contact: Gary Ferman**  
**Specialty Sports**  
**(954) 432-1143**

### **ACHILLES INTERNATIONAL: DISABLED PARTICIPANTS BRING UNIQUE STORIES TO MARATHON**

They each have incredible stories to tell. Stories of how they became disabled and how they have pulled their lives together since that day their lives changed. Tales of strength and of perseverance and the establishment of goals which will bring them together on the morning of January 30<sup>th</sup> to jumpstart another edition of the ING Miami Marathon and Half-Marathon.

Key components of race day are the Hand Cycle and Push Rim Wheelchair Divisions, both full of individuals living lives with anguish mixed with personal triumph.

For example, it only took a few seconds for the lives of Army Staff Sergeants Joe Beimfohr and Michael Fradera's to change. Ditto for Ashley Cooper.

Both Beimfohr and Fradera lost their legs in Improvised Explosive Device accidents in Iraq. A drunk driver took away Cooper's mobility.

The three have traveled a long, bumpy road to the starting line for the ING Miami Marathon, where they will be competing under the banner of Achilles International.

Achilles is a worldwide organization that encourages people with disabilities to participate in running with the general public — with a common belief that athletic achievement has a positive effect on all areas of their lives.

"Even among the thousands, each athlete with a disability is an inspiration to the others in the race," said Mary Bryant, vice president and founder of the Achilles Freedom Team of Wounded Veterans. "When Achilles first started participating in the marathon, there were 2-3 athletes with disabilities. This year, there will be more than 55. Our participation is not just local anymore. It's gone international. Achilles is proud to be a part of the global growth of the ING Miami Marathon."

Fradera, the defending champion of the ING Miami Marathon's Hand Cycle division, certainly has not put his life on hold since a Baghdad roadside bomb in 2007 changed it forever.

"When I woke up in the hospital, I was like a lot of veterans who don't know what to do with themselves," he said. "Then they started telling us about the Paralympics and all these sporting events you can do."

Since that time, the retired Army staff sergeant has learned to sail, scuba dive and water ski. Now, he helps other disabled veterans participate in water skiing clinics, and has become a certified diver as well. He is several certifications away from his ultimate goal—to become a diving instructor.

With only eight marathons under his belt, Fradera already has won three events—including the last two Disney Marathons in addition to his ING Miami title. The 33-year-old from Lakeland also tied for first in the Fort Lauderdale AIA Marathon last February.

Beinfuhr joined the Army two days after his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday and was a sergeant by age 20. On a search patrol north of Baghdad in 2005, a bomb exploded six feet away. He lost both legs, fractured his pelvis and hand and suffered abdominal injuries.

“I remember I woke up and they said ‘You’re at Walter Reed.’ I thought ‘Geez I must be messed up if I’m at Walter Reed,’” Beinfuhr said. “You’re not at Walter Reed if you’ve got a boo boo. You’re there for the big stuff.”

After nearly a year of recovery, Beinfuhr jumped into sports-related activities, quickly mastering martial arts and then learning hand cycling.

“You have two choices when you are injured,” he said. “You can either sit in a hospital bed and whine and cry or you can say ‘OK yes this happened to me but how do I go with my life from here? How do I make these changes and accept what happened to me, but still move forward being positive?’”

The 33-year-old U.S. Fish and Wildlife procurement technician from Annadale, Va. “hand cranked” his first marathon in 2008 in New York City. “It was a rough day in New York,” he laughed. He has competed in eight marathons since, and will be making his first trip to Miami.

“I’ve been wanting to do it for years,” said the 33-year-old Beinfuhr. “I’ve never been to Miami. It’s kind of like a mini vacation to do the Miami Marathon.”

Beinfuhr is co-founder of the Able Warrior System that teaches self-defense to the disabled – including many wounded war veterans who have amputations of the legs and arms.

Cooper was a 20-year-old junior college student in 2004 when she was thrown from a vehicle doing 120 mph in a 40 mph zone. The vehicle rolled over her, breaking her back and leaving her paralyzed from the chest down.

“I don’t remember any of it,” she said. “I had to read the details from the police report.”

The impaired driver died at the scene.

The former high school cheerleader and track athlete was introduced almost immediately to water skiing, and placed third at the Disabled Water Ski National Championships several years after recuperating from her injuries.

“I’m very athletic,” says Cooper, a Volusia County beach lifeguard at the time of the accident. “It was an easy translation.”

It wasn’t until last year when Cooper started dating James Heath, a veteran hand crank cyclist, that she got an up-close look at the sport. She slowly warmed up to it and began training with him. In December, the 27-year-old Cooper won the Palm Beach marathon’s female division, finishing 7<sup>th</sup> overall out of 32 athletes in her first competitive event.

Cooper, who recently graduated from the University of North Florida in Jacksonville and is applying to graduate school, has future goals in both water skiing and hand cycling. Her biggest sports-related goal, however, is to participate in the Paralympic Games.

“I would love for that to happen,” she says. “I’d like to go and kick butt in water skiing. I’ve very competitive. I enjoy sports.”

Achilles International has chapters and members in more than 70 countries, including an active group in South Florida. Approximately 50 Achilles athletes with disabilities will be at the downtown Miami starting line on January 30. Seven will be participating on foot, 10 in Pushrim wheelchairs and the rest in Hand Crank wheelchairs. Twelve of the participants are women.

“Achilles, they are a great organization that introduces people to programs,” said Beinfuhr. “A lot of the guys on the Paralympics team started out racing with Achilles. It’s just great to hang out with everyone.”

When told that Beinfuhr has entered the ING Miami Marathon, Fradera laughed. “I’m going to have to really defend my title,” he said. “I’m happy to race against him.”

### **Notable Participants From South Florida**

Lance Benson, 37, was born without legs and competes on a skateboard. It was the Miami resident who spearheaded a drive to bring the Achilles organization to South Florida in 2005. Benson has always been an athlete. As a youngster growing up in Raleigh, NC, he wrestled for his high school varsity team and competed in weightlifting. At 118 pounds, he could already bench press 336 pounds.

Lanny Carrero, 45, found Achilles International through the VA Medical Center in West Palm Beach. A rehabilitation bike that assisted with balance issues brought on by MS gave the Palm Beach Gardens resident his start. He now rides a racing bike and is becoming a veteran marathoner.

Chris Holcomb, 40, snapped his neck in an automobile accident in Vero Beach. After 48 days in a chemically induced coma and another month in Jackson Memorial’s spinal cord unit, Holcomb began life as a quadriplegic. He was introduced to Achilles International in 2009 and competed for the first time in the Miami Marathon last year. He is now a regional director of Achilles.

### ***About US Road Sports***

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