

Venture

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CHRIS CARLSON/The Orange County Register
GET A GRIP: Wheelchair-bound Rob Hill has the use of his right arm.

ROLLIN' ALONG

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March 1, 2001

By CURTIS ZUPKE
The Orange County Register

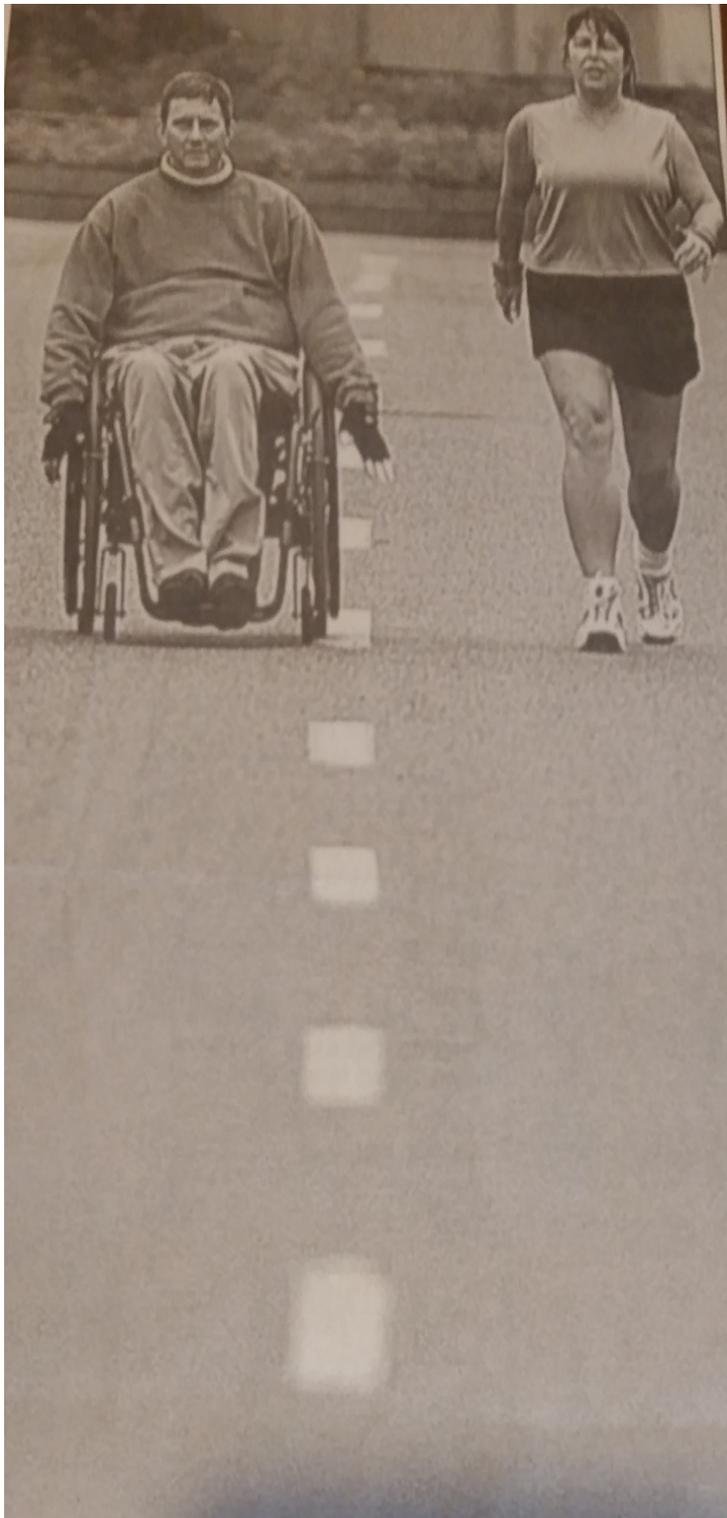
There was laughter and smiles and footsteps along the dock of the lake.

There was casual summer conversation in idyllic cottage country near Bracebridge, an afternoon drive from the suburbs of Toronto.

A company picnic in July. The ripples in the water. The seemingly harmless freeze frame of Rob Hill in the air, falling into the shallow lake.

Hill, 40, of Costa Mesa, remembers the few seconds that changed his life in 1986.

He was in his third year of college, managing a student painting business with friends.



CHRIS CARLSON/The Orange County Register

TEAM CONCEPT: Rob Hill's wife, Caroline, will run alongside him in her first marathon

A freak accident - one that makes Hill one of about 100 wheelchair athletes competing in the Los Angeles Marathon on Sunday.

Hill and friends were "horsing around" at the end of the dock, trying to push each other into the lake - which was 3 feet deep.

Hill went in and hit his head on the bottom of the lake.

"Immediately I couldn't move anything below my neck," Hill said. "My first thought was that I couldn't move."

Two of his friends were lifeguards and flipped Hill over in the cold water. He had hypothermia at the hospital, and doctors said it helped keep the swelling down.

He dislocated two vertebrae, which doctors fused together, and the trauma caused the bone to slide out of place, pinching off the spinal cord.

"I paged him and he didn't respond, which was unusual," said Hill's wife, Caroline, who will run alongside him in her first marathon. "He always called me back. I blocked a lot of it out of my mind."

Hill is a "low" quadriplegic, having no feeling in his legs but feeling and movement in his right arm, which will push him on the 26.2-mile course.

He estimates it will take him 8 to 10 hours to complete the race.

Hill has had minimal training and decided to do the race after seeing a billboard advertisement for it several weeks ago.

Most wheelchair athletes spend four months preparing for a marathon. But Hill is aiming for a healthier lifestyle, not first place.

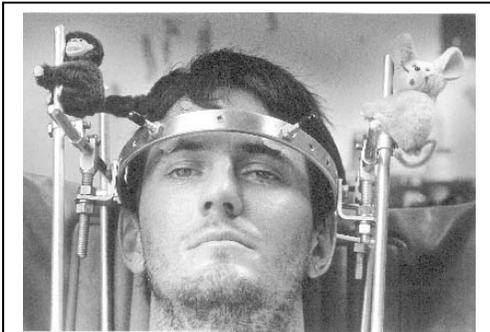
Up until last year, Hill was an admitted “burgers and fries guy.” He played hockey and rugby growing up near Toronto but ceased activity, even casual rolls around the block, after the accident.

It was then that Hill accepted his circumstance.

After a two-week stay in intensive care, Hill was transferred to a specialist facility for an eight-month rehabilitation.

For six weeks, he wore a metal “halo” device that stretches the neck. He couldn't see the other patients well with it, but he learned more from what he heard.

“There were two groups in the hospital,” Hill said. “People trying to get out of working eight hours a day in physiotherapy, and people who wanted to blame somebody.”



PHILOSOPHY: Rob Hill learned at an early age not to worry about things he can't control.

Eight months after rehabilitation, Hill completed his undergraduate studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, where he met Caroline while taking a course on taxes.

“He was the only interesting thing about the class,” Caroline said. “He always seemed to know what was going on even though he didn't pay attention.”

Hill was paying attention at age 7 when the family - Hill has two brothers, John and Todd, and a sister, Kelly - were driving through the desert and pulled into a gas station where a man was smashing his broken-down motorcycle with a cinder block.

“Look at that,” his father said.

“That's so stupid. He's destroying something he has no control over.”

It remains with Hill.

“I don't stress over things I can't control,” Hill said. “I have a deep engrained belief that things will work out for the better.”