

# Record

## Life

# Health and Fitness

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## He's a marathon man

Quadriplegic doesn't let disability get in the way of a big race

Johanna Weidner  
RECORD STAFF

Wilfrid Laurier University business graduate Robert Hill isn't a typical marathon runner.

A self-confessed couch potato who enjoys rich cuisine, Hill doesn't worry about being the first racer across the finish line. He's a quadriplegic and competes in a wheelchair, his wife Caroline running alongside.

Hill, 40, was paralyzed below the chest in a swimming accident 15 years ago when he was a student at Laurier. But he didn't let his wheelchair put the brakes on competing in the 26.2 mile Canadian International Marathon in Toronto on Oct. 14.

And last weekend, the Hills were in the Big Apple for the New York marathon. Hill beat his previous marathon time, despite a flat front tire that blew just minutes before the gun went off.

He's discovered racing in a wheelchair can be an advantage, and not just on the downhill stretches.

"Well, I was the only guy in a chair, so I was first," Hill said with a laugh about the Toronto marathon, raising his arms in mock victory.

Hill was competing in his new three-wheeled racing chair and, in his category of men 40 to 44, he placed 201st out of 234 with a time of four hours and 44 minutes.

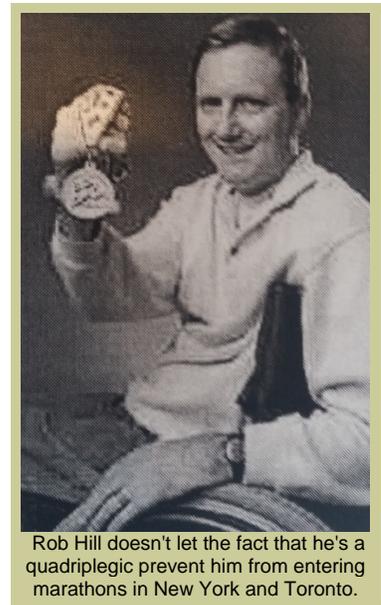
Hill lives in California with Caroline, whom he met in his business class at Laurier prior to his accident.

It was while visiting a friend's cottage near Bracebridge in 1986 that Hill jokingly pushed a friend off a dock into 3 foot-deep water. Hill was pulled in as well and hit his head on the lake bottom, dislocating a vertebra in his neck and paralyzing everything below his chest.

He has strength in both arms, but is classified as a quadriplegic because they were weakened by the neck injury.

Hill doesn't waste time worrying about what his life could have been like without that careless moment 15 years ago.

"I don't really focus on any of that stuff," Hill said. "I try to live my life like I'm not in a chair, and frankly it doesn't matter to me."



Rob Hill doesn't let the fact that he's a quadriplegic prevent him from entering marathons in New York and Toronto.

Hill said that most of the time he simply forgets that he needs a wheelchair to get around. He's determined to do the best he can with what fate dealt him.

"I have the undying belief that everything is going to work out for the better for me, and it does," Hill said.

The Orangeville native graduated with a business degree from Laurier in 1988, just eight months behind his class despite taking time for extensive physiotherapy at Sunnybrook Hospital. Later he finished a masters in business administration and a certified management account program at McMaster University. He's now the chief financial officer for a booming mortgage company in California. Caroline manages the company's human resources department.

Hill caught marathon fever in January when he spotted a pennant advertising the 26.2 mile Los Angeles marathon.

"I thought, that might be fun, it can't be that hard," Hill recalled.

With just six weeks of training, Hill and his wife entered the marathon, finishing in just under nine hours. Out of 18,000 runners, the pair were among the last 100 to cross the finish line, which was already being dismantled.

The couple knew they could only get better, and started training in earnest for the next full marathon in San Diego and other shorter courses.

Now the Hills regularly cruise around their beach neighborhood, Robert in his wheelchair and Caroline struggling to keep up on her inline skates or bicycle. Even though they're surrounded by thousands in a race, the pair said they're only competing with themselves.

"We're just trying to do better than we've done in the past," Hill said.

He plans to keep rolling on the marathon circuit for at least a year, his ultimate goal being a four-hour finish time.

As for Caroline, "I'm just worried about what he's going to try next year," she said jokingly.

Whatever he attempts, she knows he'll devote his heart and soul to the project -- and do well. "He's a pretty determined guy," she said.