

William Lehr on the evolution of wheelchair racing since placing second to Bob Hall at the Falmouth Road Race in the 1970s

By Olivia dePunte

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When William Lehr was a teenager, racing wheelchairs hadn't even been invented. His first races were in his clunky everyday wheelchair with some slight modifications he had made to it. Born with a disability that made his bones easily breakable, he was dependent on his one and only wheelchair growing up. "You had one chair. If you broke it, you were in big trouble," said Lehr.

Now he has three wheelchairs: one for daily use, one for tennis and basketball, and one for racing. Looking back, "my wheelchair was a dinosaur." The one chair did it all – even racing up and down the notorious hills of the Falmouth course. "It's exciting to see the equipment evolve," said Lehr. "It evolved because races like Falmouth were open to a wheelchair division so more and more people started to modify their chairs."

Back in Lehr's day, he didn't let the lack of wheelchairs made for speed slow him down. He was coming of age when the running boom swept the nation in the 1970s. "There weren't many options for accessible sports when I was a teenager," said Lehr. "I was introduced to wheelchair basketball, and then track started to come along."

His first introduction to the concept of wheelchair racing came from a New York Times story on Bob Hall, the first person in a wheelchair to complete the Boston Marathon. Lehr recalled, "Reading that headline, I thought that was really incredible."

That year, Lehr was inspired to compete in his first track competition where he met Bob Hall in the flesh. "He said 'come to Falmouth, they really embrace the wheelchair division.' "

He pushed up and down the hills around his Long Island home that summer, training to make his idol proud at the Falmouth Road Race. Freshly 19, Lehr made the trip to Falmouth for the first time in 1977 with, "such a tremendous amount of excitement."

"I had never pushed that far, or been with runners, and hitting that last hill and coming down to the big crowd was just great. It changed my whole outlook about what was possible. I finished second to the great Bob Hall – and I was hooked."

That first race spurred him on to do many more, returning to Falmouth more than 20 times and going on to qualify for the Boston Marathon a number of times as well. He had a long and

successful career as a manufacturing representative for custom-made wheelchair products, working to develop the chairs he wished he had access to growing up.

Now retired at 65, he is staying very active – playing tennis and still competing in six or seven races a year. His training is going well; he’s back to pushing the hills around Long Island and ready to return to the Falmouth Road Race this August.

His motivation to keep pushing? “If I’m huffing and puffing up the hill, trying to finish this race on a Sunday morning, maybe Monday morning the guy I was next to running up that hill, maybe he’s an employment guy somewhere and maybe somebody in a wheelchair comes up to his office to try to get a job. Instead of thinking of the million reasons why he wouldn’t hire that person, he might remember the guy in the chair working just as hard to finish something as he was.”