

July 22, 2007

When Life Is a Triathlon, Another Test Is No Problem

By DALTON WALKER

It is almost 3 a.m. The humidity has awakened Byron Breeze a few minutes before the alarm clock has rung in his Bronx apartment. He stays awake anyway, and starts his daily exercise routine of 100 sit-ups and 100 dips. He then loads his backpack with his Bible, swim trunks and a few other essentials as [Jay-Z](#), Nas and Lil Wayne rhyme in his headphones.

He grabs a bite to eat, and by 4 a.m. is out the door to take the No. 21 bus and then the 5 and 6 subway lines to the East Side of Manhattan. It is still dark outside, very early for most commuters, but it takes Mr. Breeze, 33, a little longer than most to reach his destination.

He was born with no legs and misshapen arms, each with a finger. Yet he gets around fairly easily, and most of the time without a wheelchair. He can even drive a car with help from duct tape and sticks the size of broom handles to push the accelerator and brake pedals. He lives with two friends, but says he seldom needs their aid to get around the apartment. He goes about most of his daily routines on his own.

"I'm very self-sufficient," he adds. "Life is a triathlon. I got to stay fit in order to do the things I do on a daily basis."

But today Mr. Breeze will take part in a real triathlon, the seventh annual Nautica New York City Triathlon in Manhattan.

He will join the other athletes in the Hudson River, swimming 1,500 meters; then along the Henry Hudson Parkway, riding a bike 40 kilometers; and finally in Central Park, running 10 kilometers. Mr. Breeze plans to do the swimming portion with a modified right breaststroke with the aid of a coach, the bicycle portion with a specially designed hand cycle and the running portion on a skateboard.

"He's my main man," said John Korff, the triathlon organizer. "I met him, and he was determined to compete. He's a part of our team, a part of us."

Mr. Breeze makes his living largely by panhandling, spending most weekdays at the intersection of Madison Avenue and 60th Street. He has been a regular fixture there since 2002, and likes to refer to the panhandling as social networking. He has met many people on the corner, including Kathleen Kiley, a filmmaker who is making a documentary about his life. Clips of the film can be seen on the Web site halfasoulja.com. Soulja (slang for soldier) is Mr. Breeze's nickname.

Mr. Breeze grew up in Washington. Most of his schooling occurred in ordinary classrooms, said his mother, Patricia Hayes. "My magnificent child, he's just what you see," she said. "He grew up with all sorts of obstacles in life to be an extraordinary, wonderful young man."

After graduating from high school, Mr. Breeze lived with his mother and was part of a rap group. He moved to

New York in 2000 with dreams of creating an independent music label.

Years ago, he found that he needed to stay in shape to maintain the strength to get around. So when Mr. Breeze heard about the triathlon and decided to compete, it was not such a far-fetched notion.

The triathlon helped pay for Mr. Breeze's training equipment and a gym membership, Mr. Korff said. Mr. Breeze will start first with the most experienced athletes today so he will have ample time to finish, Mr. Korff said. His mother will be watching, along with two siblings and his father, Byron Breeze Sr.

On most days, it takes Mr. Breeze about three hours to get to the East Side from the Bronx. On this July day, with the temperature above 90 degrees, Mr. Breeze sat in his wheelchair at Madison and 60th, sipping Gatorade, a towel on his shoulders. A pack hung from the back of the chair and a small plastic bag with a few dollars in it was attached to the front.

He carries no sign asking for handouts. Instead people recognize him and stop to say hello and maybe offer a dollar or two. The money he collects daily, which sometimes can be a few hundred dollars, is his only income besides a small Social Security check, he said.

"Some people are amazed with my attitude," Mr. Breeze said. "All walks of life come through here. I look at this as a curbside-consulting agency. You do good things; good things come back to you."

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