

Loss of leg doesn't keep Lino Lakes man on the sidelines

David La Vaque, Star Tribune

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Chris Bretoi hopes to get through Saturday's North Shore In-line Marathon in Duluth with lots of speed and only a little pain -- tough tasks to accomplish on a prosthetic leg.

Bretoi, of Lino Lakes, lost his left leg below the knee in a 1989 traffic accident but since then has participated in a variety of sports. He first tried the North Shore In-line Marathon in 2002 and remains the only lower-limb amputee to skate at the event.

"I like to do things like this to be an example and because I like to be active," he said.

Bretoi, 50, has been involved with sports nearly all his life. He played football, hockey, lacrosse, soccer and tennis in high school, then hockey and lacrosse at Brown University. On Feb. 6, 1989, the night of the accident, he was heading to the Northwest Athletic Club in Brooklyn Center to play racquetball.

He pulled over on Interstate Hwy. 694 where the Central Avenue on-ramp merges with the freeway to change a flat tire. A car going about 50 miles per hour hit him from behind, severing the leg.

"I was lucky," he said. "Everyone I've met who's been hit like that lost both legs."

About a week later, he was on a tennis court, hitting balls from his wheelchair. With the help of a prosthetic leg, he began playing stand-up tennis in 1996. But he wasn't finished. His children, Travis and Jasmin, played bandy, and he wanted to join them on the ice. That led to a desire to play hockey again.

He began ice skating in 2001 and plays one night a week in Shoreview. He described his first couple of times on the ice as embarrassing but said in-line skating came much easier because you go one direction on a non-slippery surface.

He starts training for the in-line marathon season around Memorial Day, going 15 miles roundtrip on a trail from the Hugo Town Hall to Forest Lake. In the weeks leading up to a marathon, he adds a 20-mile trip on the Gateway Trail from Oakdale to Stillwater.

A three-year veteran of the North Shore Marathon, Bretoi has lowered his times each year. His mark of 1 hour, 46 minutes and 51 seconds last season was nearly an hour better than his first year, when all he wanted to do was finish. Accomplishing that goal led to two weeks on crutches because of blisters on his stump.

"The higher my activity level, the more likely there will be periods of working through pain," he said.

Technology has eased his pain. He's been wearing a prosthesis called the Harmony P2 for about 1½ years. The device, made by Otto Bock Health Care of Plymouth, uses a vacuum system to reduce the likelihood of blisters or other abrasions.

Finishing the North Shore marathon in less than 2 hours for a second straight year is his goal, but by just showing up to race he's earning praise.

"I get a lot of encouragement," he said. "One lady, who was a teacher, said she was going to tell her students about me whenever they talk about not being able to do something."



Chris Bretoi skated on the Gateway Trail in Oakdale. With a partial prosthetic, he has played tennis and hockey and finished the North Shore In-Line Marathon the past three years.