



NEWSDAY PHOTO / JULIA GAINES

The field takes off May 8 in the Cinco de Mayo 5K in Prospect Park in Brooklyn, a race sponsored by Club Atlético Mexicano de Nueva York.

# Running with the right crowd

■ Many athletes of Hispanic descent find more than just camaraderie in Club Atlético Mexicano

BY CARIN ZISSIS

Panfilo Gomez can run a mile in less than five minutes. Somehow, even though he works six days a week hauling 60-pound boxes at a Key Food supermarket in Queens and has a family he loves to be with, the four-time marathoner makes time to train almost every day.

Gomez is one of the best runners in the Brooklyn-based Club Atlético Mexicano de Nueva York (CAMNY), which organizes the annual Cinco de Mayo 5K in Prospect Park. Many of its members are Mexican immigrants who work long

hours in grocery stores and factories. "The work I do is very hard, and that's what keeps me from performing better in the sport," said Gomez, 31, a native of Mexico who lives in Jamaica.

Each year in the New York City Marathon, which draws more than 35,000 participants, some of Club Atlético's runners are among the first few hundred to cross the finish line. In 2004, the club ranked 11th out of more than 160 groups affiliated with the New York Road Runners, which organizes the marathon.

"In CAMNY, there's friendship," club director Adán Lázaro said. "If someone needs a job, if someone needs a ride, if someone needs food, we help."

Lázaro, 51, who has competed in 24 marathons worldwide, founded the club in 1992 along

with six other Mexicans from the state of Puebla. He views Club Atlético, which has more than 50 members, as a forum where runners can learn about good health and training, and as a supportive network.

"They need to get together. They need to talk to each other — even about how to cope with jobs and training," Lázaro said.

Unlike some running clubs that help elite performers with expenses, the club does not pay its runners.

"We survive with nothing more than little contributions," Lázaro said. "Many have left for other clubs because other clubs say, 'We'll give you money' or 'We'll give you clothes.' And we don't have that money."

Pedro Medina, 35, one of the club's original members, is busy with his construction com-

pany, Poblamex, but helps CAMNY whenever he can.

"To be an active member of CAMNY is . . . to stay away from vices, from drugs, from depression, from problems," said Medina, adding that many members are undocumented and have troubles related to their immigration status. "Sometimes, you come to run and to forget everything."

Gomez, who trains with his brother in Forest Park, read about the club in a Mexican sports magazine before coming to New York six years ago. "I never imagined I'd be one of them," he said.

Many CAMNY members hail from Mexico, but Colombians, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans and other Americans have joined over the years. One top athlete, George Alexis, is originally from Grenada and joined 10 years ago.

"They did me a favor," said Alexis, 41, of East Flatbush. "When I was down, when I had no experience, it was them that helped me, and I think that was what kept me running all these years."

The soft-spoken butcher has run the New York City Marathon eight times, including a 2:47 finish in 2001, when a burst of energy kept him running for 2 miles past the finish line.

For other runners, the club inspires patriotism and appreciation for the red, white and green uniform.

"When people see the colors, they know it represents Mexico," said Gomez, wearing his CAMNY tank top and a grin after the 5K race. "Even if people don't speak Spanish, they yell, 'Go Mexico!' It's great when people support you."

Carin Zissis is a freelance writer.