Exercising with George George

BY GEORGE MCALEER

"I can't exercise because I have MS," you say. "I can't do much of anything."

STOP! I have MS too. I've gone from a cane to a walker to a wheelchair. I have to exercise every day. I don't think you're any different.

"George, when will you stop working out?"

I'm going to quit tomorrow. In the meantime, I have a chairobics exercise class today. That's my Wednesday and Thursday activity. On

Mondays and Fridays it's Cybex weight machines at the Fairfax County Recreation Center. On Tuesdays it's a water exercise class for people with MS, and Saturdays is tai chi in a chair. And on the seventh day He rested, and so do I!

"You don't understand, George. I'm in a wheelchair; I can't walk."

Same with me. Is my wheelchair going to slow me down? Yes. Stop me? Not a chance!

"I just don't have that kind of discipline."

Baloney! Sorry for being so harsh, but that's how I feel. You'll probably need some coaching, pushing, or motivation. Two people did this for me a dozen years ago. Bill and Annette were military officers working with me in Washington. One day, Bill let me have it: "McAleer, get off your butt and come walk with me."

Bill was a marathoner (he ran 29 of them), but heart surgery switched him to walking instead. I had been using a cane for two years, but he challenged me to walk a mile with him anyway. We did it every day for a week; the next week we did two miles each day. In weeks to come we walked even more—six days a week. Bill and Annette would walk a half step in front of me, and if they heard a tripping or falling noise behind, their hands would immediately latch together to prevent me from falling. (Yes, it had to be done several times.)

Eight months after my first walk, I completed the 20K (12½ miles) MS Walk—I wrote about it for **InsideMS** in 1992. The following year I won the President's Physical Fitness Award for walking 2½ miles in less than 35 minutes—and doing it 50 times.

It's great having walking or exercise partners, particularly when you're begin-

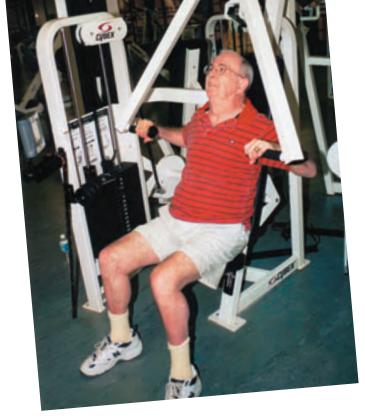
ning. But I think you'll find a partner if you begin on your own—gyms and rec centers tend to be friendly places.

Several years later I began using a three-wheeled walker, so my distance walking ended. That's when I began using a recumbent bicycle and weights at my place of work—I wrote about that for **InsideMS** in 1997.

A word of advice regarding weights or weight machines: have a fitness trainer teach you, and begin with half the weight they recommend. Why? You'll want to come back because it's so easy. When I started with the leg press, the trainer recommended 110 pounds. I reduced it to 80, which was so easy that I truly enjoyed doing it three days a week. I did the same with the other machines, too. I now do 160 pounds on the leg press. I increased it five pounds every month or two—at my own pace.

I've also created an "exercise motivator". I tell everyone I know about my exercise program. I tell





it often, with a different slant on it each time. Why do I do that? With so many people asking me about what I'm trying to accomplish, I have to keep doing it. It would be very embarrassing to say that I stopped or hadn't done it for weeks.

Come join me.

A number of years ago my neurologist put it to me very simply: either you exercise and work out or you won't be able to. That was a no-brainer; I got the message.

A number of church communities have seven sacraments. I've added an eighth for myself, called the sacrament of "Showing Up". Half the battle of exercising is the psychological one of getting there. The director of the Rec Center, Bill Hellwig, watches out to make sure I show up. Even so, I have a number of reasons why I don't have to go:

- I exercised yesterday.
- I don't feel good today.
- It can wait till tomorrow (a good afternoon excuse).

I have to remove this kind of thinking and just go do it. That is why I call it the sacrament of Showing Up. The actual accomplishment of my exercise program after arriving is easy; it's almost automatic. By the time I'm finished, the endorphins are flowing, and I feel great! And, as I tell my friends, the nicest part of my 1½-hour program is going home. Everyone agrees with that. ■

Naval Academy graduate George McAleer has 3,000 flying hours as an Air Force pilot and a doctorate in organizational behavior from the University of Southern California. Recently retired from the faculties of the National War College in Washington and Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, he continues to give motivational and leadership talks and workshops.

