

Long Island Now

Autistic Great Neck twins set for second Boston Marathon

Saturday April 13, 2013 9:31 AM By Tara Conry



Alex Schneider and his running coach, Kevin McDermott, have a secret language.

As they charged down the trails at Bethpage State Park Thursday for one of their last training runs before Monday's Boston Marathon, McDermott would occasionally extend his hand behind him, and Schneider would tap it to show he's alert.

These types of cues are the only way McDermott can communicate with Schneider, 22, of Great Neck, who is a gifted runner but profoundly autistic and non-verbal. When the pair first started training together in 2006,

Schneider had already gone through several volunteer coaches, who couldn't keep up with his fast pace.

"Alie was really excited to run to the point where he couldn't contain himself," said McDermott, 54, of East Islip. "He would just take off ... pretty much at full speed."

McDermott had no experience coaching an autistic runner. In the beginning, he tried holding onto Schneider's shirt to rein him in, but ended up with a hernia. He later figured out the best way to train Schneider was to teach him to stay behind and use gestures to guide him through each run.

With this method, Schneider has completed four marathons, including the 2012 Hamptons race, where he won first place in his age group and set a personal record of 3 hours, 23 minutes and 25 seconds.

"Alie's like a driven machine and Kevin guides him like a missile," said Allan Schneider, Alex's father.

Since discovering their mutual love of running seven years ago thanks to the Rolling Thunder Special Needs Program, Alex Schneider and his twin brother, Jamie, who is also severely autistic, have run roughly 120 road races. On Monday, the twins will be competing in their second Boston Marathon, but their experiences will be vastly different.

While Alex's compulsive tendencies cause him to be extremely focused during his runs, Jamie is more prone to throwing tantrums, according to Allan Schneider and his wife, Robyn, 56.

Jamie enjoys meeting people along the course, especially the pretty girls, Allan Schneider said, but sometimes the crowd can overwhelm him.

During a 5k in Hicksville five years ago, Jamie threw himself to the ground in a fit, cutting open his knees. Since then, Allan Schneider, 60, has taken over the role of coaching him through races even though he had no prior running experience.

To run with his dad, Jamie has had to slow down significantly, but the races are now more enjoyable as Schneider has become an expert at detecting when his son is becoming anxious and diffusing him.

"It's like a mental chess game," Allan Schneider said.

When he sees Jamie getting stressed while on the course, Allan Schneider will bring him to a water stop, or point to a sign, anything to divert his son's attention from what might be bothering him. Giving him an iPod has also helped.

"The hardest time is right before the race starts," he said, adding that Jamie is sometimes spooked by the starting gun or cannon.

Allan Schneider has noticed that running has a positive impact on the twins' behavior, because it allows them to release some of their energy. It's also helped Allan manage his multiple sclerosis, although he still experiences fatigue, headaches and muscle pain.

"I suffer a lot for it, but I'm running with my son," he said. "It's an activity we can do together and I will do it as long as I can."

Robyn Schneider has also embraced running since she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2008. Robyn, who is currently on medication for the disease, runs with Jamie for shorter distances, but stays on the sidelines when the twins are competing in marathons.

"I have butterflies every single time," she said of waiting for them to cross the finish line.

The feeling brings her back to the day in 2005 when her boys first discovered their passion for running. She'd taken them to Eisenhower Park in East Meadow to meet with coaches from the Rolling Thunder Special Needs Program.

Since the twins are not capable of telling their parents what they enjoy, Robyn Schneider has always signed them up for activities and hoped for the best.

"It was a little scary, because they have never been more than a foot away from us," she said. But when the boys returned, they were smiling and the coaches, while panting, told her the twins were natural runners.

"You can never say 'No,' because you don't know what your kid is capable of," she added. "What keeps us going every day is knowing that we are giving the boys the experiences they love."

To learn more about the Schneider twins, visit autismrunners.com.

[< back to article](#)

