

Team Alie, Bib 1475

Great Neck, NY, 27, 2:56:54

“Team Alie”, also known as #TeamSAlieBoyd; Alex (Alie) Schneider, Boyd Carrington, and Sal Nastasi represents three men drawn together by unselfish acts of kindness and a love of the sport of running.

Alie is 27 years old and has autism. Autism is a broad range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication. Autism affects about 1 in 59 children. Both Alie and his identical twin brother Jamie have severe autism. The Schneider twins are both nonverbal. They do not communicate when thirsty, tired, hurt, or cold. Boyd Carrington and Sal Nastasi are Alie’s coaches and running partners, and were Alie’s guides as they trekked through the Boston Marathon course in those historical conditions on April 16th. Guides who run the marathon with an athlete do not get a bib number or an official finish time. Both Boyd and Sal had devoted months training Alie, and this was Alie’s race. From the early hours before the marathon and throughout the day, his guides assumed a huge responsibility taking care of Alie. While on the course, they needed to keep him on pace, hydrate him, be aware of his body temperature, and be prepared for any unforeseen events along the way.



Alie started running when he was 15 years old. His parents, Robyn and Allan, could tell he had a passion for running. When he ran, they saw a transformation; almost Zen-like from the very beginning. It was a look of euphoria. Both boys started running in special needs running clubs, where they were paired with seasoned volunteer runners. They ran in a few local races, but Jamie started having some behaviors, so Allan thought, “Let me try running with Jamie; I can keep up with him and I can gauge his behaviors better than anyone.” Allan has MS, so running has helped him cope with the effects of the disease. Soon after, Robyn laced up her shoes for the first time and found running therapeutic to lessen the detrimental effects of chemotherapy from breast cancer. Robyn and Allan would alternate running and racing with Jamie. Aside from local races, Jamie ran 8 marathons, including 4 Boston, all with his dad. Running became the focal point of their lives, and has been a source of strength as they face the challenges of day-to-day life.

They soon met Kevin McDermott, a USATF certified trainer who took on the challenge to coach Alie, and he remained his coach for 11 years. Kevin set the foundation that has shaped Alie into the runner he is today. When Kevin first started training him, he realized the first major hurdle was pacing. Alie would take off like a rocket each and every time he ran, and stayed on that pace regardless of how far they were running. Sometimes that pace was a 6 or 7 minute mile. Kevin tried various ways to slow him down. At first, he tried holding out a branch while they ran so Alie wouldn’t go past it. He also tried holding onto his shirt and would pull on it to get him to ease up. Eventually he discovered that running diagonally in front from Alie was the most effective and safest option for both of them. Kevin trained

and ran with Alie in close to 200 races. However, about a year before the 2018 Boston Marathon, Kevin moved with his family to Costa Rica. Robyn and Allan needed to find a new coach that had the heart

and commitment to take over so that Alie could pursue his passion to run Boston again.



Boyd frequently “ran” into Alie and Kevin when they would train together. Like Kevin, Boyd is also a USATF Certified coach. Occasionally he would run with them, and on one occasion, while seeing them during his out and back running routine, he told Kevin that he would be willing to help out as a pacer if he ever needed someone to run a marathon with Alie. Kevin then mentioned this to Robyn, and in May of 2017 Boyd decided to help coach Alie. Boyd is a competitive guy and didn’t quite know what to expect when he first started running with Alie, but he thought he would give it a shot. At first, he admits, he didn’t really enjoy it because it was unstructured, as he was co-coaching Alie with another runner. He contemplated quitting, but his girlfriend Tara Wilson suggested that he read Robyn’s book about her boys, *“Silent Running-Our Family’s Journey to the Finish Line with Autism”*. Boyd remembers reading about total strangers helping the twins have a beautiful and meaningful life and he realized the truth in an old saying, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Reading her book changed his perspective about coaching Alie and he wanted to do something rewarding and beneficial for

the Schneider family. So he took control and slowly started adding some structure around Alie’s training. He asked Robyn to buy Alie a Garmin watch with a heart rate monitor. When Boyd trains a runner he’ll ask how they feel, because obviously, you can’t ask someone to do something without knowing how they feel. But in Alie’s case, he cannot verbalize how he feels, so the heart rate monitor was one indication of Alie’s fitness level. “Alie never questions what he is instructed to do, so as a coach you really need to pay attention so as not to exert Alie and cause an injury. Alie gives 200% every day and his natural instinct is to go out, wind up, and run fast without thinking how far he has to go”. Boyd wanted to make sure that he didn’t burn him out.

Sal met Robyn 10 years ago when she started a race for autism awareness for her sons. Sal is the lead singer and plays guitar in his band, “Ready in 10”. His band played at the race that day. Later on, he would often see Robyn, Alie and Kevin on the Bethpage bike path. Sal would run in the middle of the day, the same time she would run on her own, while Alie was running with Kevin.

When Alie was training for the 2017 NYC Marathon, Boyd asked Sal if he would run the second half with them. He agreed, and they ran an amazing race, pacing Alie to the finish line in 2:50:05! He was so excited and energized about Alie’s performance, but he wasn’t able to commit the time to train him on a regular basis. Then he read Robyn’s book. He called her up and said, “Your book changed my life. I want to run with Alie and help with his training. What do you need?” They started running three times a week in every weather condition. Sal thought, “When you train, you need to train in all conditions because you never know what the conditions will be on race day.” In March 2018, Sal ran a 25k race

with Alie in the snow, finishing in a time of 1:35:03 which in hindsight really helped them prepare for what they were about to embark on in Boston.

Alie is no rookie when it comes to running marathons. This was his 6th Boston marathon and 18th marathon overall. His PR is the 2017 New York City Marathon in a time of 2:50:05. Obviously, he's one tough runner like the rest of the people in this book. Boyd and Sal are both incredible runners as well. Sal ran Boston in 2013 in a time of 2:35:26 and Boyd's PR, in 2014 is 2:36:26. The goal for Boston was to run sub 2:50, but given the weather conditions, that goal was thrown out the window and finishing safely was Boyd and Sal's number one concern.

Heading into the weekend, Boyd was hoping the weather wasn't going to be as predicted. Saturday was nice, Sunday was misty and chilly, so he was hoping marathon Monday would be the same. If it were they would be fine. But as we all know, Mother Nature had other plans for these three! Sal was stalking the forecast and realized Monday would be the worst-case scenario. He admitted that if he wasn't running with Alie he might not have run at all. As they rode to Hopkinton the morning of the marathon, he remembers looking out the window at the freezing rain and snow and thought, "What are we doing?!" He understood the toughest part was that it wasn't about him, it was about protecting Alie and making sure he is safe and comfortable. "Alie will just follow what you do; he doesn't react to the rain or any weather conditions for that matter." Sal just planned to make him as happy and content as possible. Robyn and Allan had been checking the weather starting from ten days out. They were prepared; with ponchos, rain jackets, throwaway clothes, gloves, hand warmers, hats, you name it. Robyn knew that Alie didn't pay much attention to the weather so she was hoping his love for running would carry him through.

Robyn remembers being worried about the new Nike Vapor Fly 4% shoes they just bought Alie for the marathon. They were so thin and light, and she was concerned they would fall apart. After consulting with Boyd and Sal, and given the conditions, they all agreed it was best to stick with what they felt would be best and chose the Saucony Kinvara for Alie's race day shoes. Team Alie had decided to race in matching clothing. Boyd thought it would be best to wear shorts, so they decided that black shorts, an orange tank top with "Team Alie" across the front, a long sleeve black running shirt for under the tank, black running hat, black gloves, and black compression leg sleeves would be their uniform.

Race morning was finally here! Robyn and Allan were excited but very worried, as Alie had never experienced such harsh weather conditions quite like this. They can distinctly remember hearing the hotel windows rattling that morning and realized the weather people may have actually gotten it right. It was going to be miserable. Robyn rented a limo to drive Alie, Boyd and Sal to Boston Common where she took pictures; tearfully kissed him good-bye, and watched as he boarded the bus for the long journey to the starting line in Hopkinton. Boyd remembers riding to Hopkinton and seeing all the trees that had fallen or snapped from the previous storm. He knew the conditions would be bad. But when they arrived at the Athlete's Village it wasn't anything remotely close to what he was expecting. It was like Woodstock. There was just mud everywhere. People were walking around with plastic bags; there was so much rain, and the village was a complete and utter mess. His feet were frozen before the race even started, and he remembers trying to walk and how difficult it was to move around in ankle deep mud. Most people were just standing around under the tent. Boyd had run Boston 3 other years, and these were by far the most miserable conditions he had ever experienced. Team Alie found a place in

the tent to huddle up and stay close to each other for warmth. Boyd remembers he couldn't put anything down because it would just get ruined.

Alie qualified on his own for the marathon with his NYC time, but he also runs in the Mobility Impaired division, so it was a relief when they were finally able to leave Athlete's village and start heading to the start corrals even before Wave 1. Alie never really knows how far he will be running at the beginning of a race. Whether a 5K or a marathon, he just gets on the start line ready to run. He is completely dependent on his coaches for pacing him based on the distance he will be running. Robyn and Allan believed he knew this was a special race and a long one, having run the marathon several times before. And once they saw the twinkle in his eye and the calmness in his demeanor, they knew he was excited. Boyd believes, "Although Alie doesn't speak, he is very intelligent. He can sense from other people's behavior. He picks up on their energy and excitement." On marathon day they could all tell he wanted to run.

They all walked/jogged to the start, found some port-a-potties and were able to get Alie to go to the bathroom. Sal thought, "Thumbs up, good day, one less thing to worry about." They finally arrived in their corral just after the National Anthem. Sal was not nervous about the race. He knew it would be a challenge, but "Once you get running you're just running. You're doing the same stuff, it just sucks a little more."

Boyd remembers thinking they trained all winter for this and felt confident they were prepared. The announcer finally released their wave and now it was showtime. Just as they started, a funny thing happened. In first 800 meters Boyd spotted a \$20 bill and quickly stopped to pick it up. He caused a bottleneck, and a bunch of runners started yelling. Boyd later read a blog about a guy who saw the \$20 bill but didn't pick it up. But Boyd couldn't resist! Sal thought he was crazy. Alie stops on a dime, so if Boyd stops he stops. And he did. Boyd and Sal knew they needed to get moving again before someone stumbled on them and knocked them down. So they took off again together, and in the first mile, running through sleet and fierce winds, suddenly Alie did something they never saw before. There was a steep downhill and Alie grabbed on to both of them and locked arms. They ran like that for about a half mile. Sal was talking him down saying, "It's all right". When they finally got him to a flat area they separated, and Sal was telling Alie, "You'll be OK." This was an emotional moment for Sal, realizing that Alie grabbed onto them because he trusted them to keep him safe. Now that they were separated, Team Alie got into their arrowhead formation where Alie would run in the middle. Their plan was for Alie to tuck in behind them while they blocked the elements. Boyd thought, "Alie always wants to run fast. The challenge is holding him back. He doesn't understand that these conditions are grueling and we'll have to take it easy."

Keeping Alie at an appropriate pace throughout the marathon exerts a great deal of energy. Even in the arrowhead formation, he invariably tries to pass them. So while one of them reins him back to the appropriate pace, the other zigzags to the water stops, grabs one for themselves and one for Alie. This enables Alie not to exert himself zigzagging past runners to the water stops. This tag-team approach allows them to stay on course to maintain their pace. If one gets a cramp, the other keeps Alie on pace while the other stretches. Keeping Alie safe and with them the entire race is a number one major concern because he could run off at any time.

People were cheering for them and a few runners moved closer and ran with them. Alie was pumped and kept pushing the pace. But Sal and Boyd both thought, "Around mile 11 or 12 we knew conditions

wouldn't allow for a PR and it took a lot for us to slow him down." They were passing a lot of runners. Alie doesn't understand pace, he just gives it all. They were running based on feel and the signs for a fast race just weren't there.

When they got to Wellesley, the girls were screaming his name, and he was smiling. They could tell he was happy. Gusts of wind and rain were pelting them in the face and they were just laughing. Boyd and Sal kept thinking that their number one priority was to take care of Alie as best as they could. At mile 13 Boyd knew it wasn't going to be a PR day but he knew Alie would never give up. He knew he had to try and rein him in.

The next big milestone was getting to the Newton Hills. Sal remembers turning the corner at the fire station just at the start of entering Newton and approaching the first hill thinking they are good to go. Then came that second hill and Boyd said, "Is this Heartbreak?" Sal was thinking "Uh oh", because there were two more hills before Heartbreak. Just before getting to Heartbreak, Sal turned to Alie and said, "Come on buddy, we got this, WE GOT THIS!" Just at that moment, Boyd needed the bathroom, so he jumped over a fence and left the team. He told them to keep going and he would catch back up. So then it was just Sal and Alie. Sal did everything he could to motivate Alie saying, "Alright buddy, it's me and you. After this last hill it's all downhill from here. Come on buddy, COME ON BUDDY!" Alie was actually pushing the pace as they ran up Heartbreak Hill. But at mile 22 Sal could tell Alie was starting to slow down. Around mile 23, Sal kept talking to him and encouraging him. Usually he has to hold him back to maintain their pace, but at that moment he was encouraging him to go faster. He looked at his watch and when he saw that they were running 6:50s, he decided to run Alie's pace, as he could tell he was feeling fatigued. By then Boyd caught up to them and Team Alie was intact. They were both thinking the same thing, "Let's just get him to the finish safely."

Team Alie ran the last four miles at a 7, 8, then 9 minute pace. For most people that is still incredibly fast. As they ventured through Boston and made the right on Hereford and left on Boylston, the crowd was cheering loudly. Alie ran a brave and very strong race. Team Alie finished in 2:56:54!

Once they crossed the finish line however, Sal remembers the next hour as one of the worst hours of the day. Boyd was in a daze. Once you stop moving if you weren't covered up immediately your core temperature drops. Boyd was fine as soon as they finished but as they were walking around the finish area he became weak. The medics put him in a wheelchair but he was craving a Starbucks so he hopped out of the wheelchair, jumped a fence, and was going to use his lucky \$20 to buy coffee. His hands were shaking so badly he couldn't get the money out of his pocket. He gave the barista his jacket and the woman said, "Take it, it's free." Meanwhile, back at the finish line, Sal was alone with Alie. He had his arm around him waiting to get his clothes, trying to warm him up. He just wanted to get him to his parents. They stood there for 30-40 minutes. The medical volunteers eventually came up to them and asked if they needed medical attention. Sal said, "This is an autistic runner and I need to get his clothes." "They hurried us along and we finally got



our dry clothes and made our way to the changing area.” Alie was freezing. Sal couldn’t bend his fingers and said it was torture getting clothes on Alie. He couldn’t even get his phone out of his bag to call Robyn because his hands were so frozen. Luckily Robyn called and he was able to say, “Hey Siri, pick up the phone.” He told Robyn they were OK and getting their clothes. Once she knew where they were she made her way to meet up with them.

Allan was with Jamie waiting back at the hotel while Robyn and Tara worked their way through the streets to find them. It was chaos. The gusty rain hadn’t let up and the wind was howling. The streets had barricades blocking them from where they had to go, creating more of a delay to get to Alie. At one point Robyn pleaded with the security guards to let them through. It was a nightmare. When they finally met up with them, Alie couldn’t move and was frozen to the bone. Luckily, they were right in front of the medic tent and they brought him in to warm up. The medics laid him down, wrapped him in warming blankets, gave him fluids, and did whatever they could to keep him warm. As Robyn stood next to Alie who was covered in layers of blankets from head to toe, with only his face peering through, all she could see was Alie smiling! He had that special twinkle in his eye, the one that confirms his love of running. She couldn’t stop kissing him. Robyn held onto him tightly, steadying him as they walked back to their hotel. Robyn and Allan were bursting with pride. His performance was indeed impressive, and a true testament to his unwavering endurance and passion for running.

Oh, and by the way, Alie finished first in his division!

Some final thoughts from Team Alie:

Robyn: “Each time Alie or Jamie cross the finish line of a race, my heart is full and bursting with pride. When they run, I know that they are fulfilling their passion. Boyd, Sal, and Kevin have selflessly devoted themselves to enriching Alie’s life by training him to reach his goals, and I’m grateful.”

Allan: “When Alie and Jamie are running on the course alongside all the other runners, they are no longer defined by their autism. They are just two runners fulfilling their love for running. Their story has inspired people all over the world and that is so gratifying.”

Boyd: “When coaching an athlete, be sure to understand the athlete. With Alie, I am able to read his body language. That has helped me immensely to structure his training and increase his level of performance. He is strong and determined to finish fast, and that’s why coaching him is so rewarding.”

Sal: “You can never be as proud of yourself as you can be for someone that you’re helping. It’s amazing to watch Alie as he progresses. Though the day was tough, it was great to soak in the end of the race with Alie and Boyd...well worth the suffering!!”

To read more about Alie and Jamie Schneider, go to: www.autismrunners.com