

Allan Schneider – Father and Coach for Jamie

It all started in 2006. As the father of twin boys with autism, I would soon learn that they were natural and gifted athletes and runners. As I watched from the sidelines as they competed in mainstream races with volunteer coaches guiding them along the course, my pride for them was exploding. Although they are both severely autistic, non-verbal, with very challenging behaviors, they can run. And they enjoy it! Alex has a real gift, running his first marathon in 3:27:47. Jamie is slower, but steady, running his best 5K at 25:00. Running suddenly took on a purpose for them, and for us as a family.

After several races, there was one that changed everything for us. The sight of Jamie crossing the finish line with bruised and bloody knees from a temper tantrum; a self-induced fall. This shocked us into making a choice. Either Jamie has to stop running, or my wife Robyn or I had to get involved. The coaches were trying their best, and Jamie had natural athletic ability, but would sometimes have erratic behavior during races. Robyn and I decided that we would become involved in Jamie's running. We started this endeavor slowly as we both had health issues, but were in fairly good physical shape. In a fairly short time we alternated by me running with Jamie in training, and Robyn pacing him on her bike. I slowly took over so that Jamie could run in races but as Jamie was a faster runner than I, it was somewhat difficult slowing him to my pace. Once that was done, his behaviors seemed to decrease. As his father, I had insight into his behavior and could usually sense when he had anxiety, while running. To adapt and overcome this, I will change the pace, alter the course and engage him, using any creative tool I can think of. I soon learned it was a mental chess game from start to finish, sometimes for hours during a long run. Years ago, at the start of a race, a "cannon" went off right beside us. Ever since then, it seems the fear of the unknown at the start of a race to be the cause of his anxiety. As runners, we never really know how the race will be started, nor is it really important to us. Whether it is the loudspeaker directions, national anthem or the starting gun or horn, we are psyched to run. Jamie is like a spooked horse in the starting gate before a race, building up anxiety for reasons that we cannot change. But once that is over, he starts running with a smile, happy and eager to run along with his fellow runners.

When running in a marathon with thousands of runners, crowd noise, jockeying for position and general pandemonium are all causes for anxiety for Jamie and me. Sometimes if his anxiety increases it may lead to behaviors, which in turn interrupts the rhythm and pace of the race for us. Unlike his brother Alex, who will happily run any distance at any location, at his fastest pace; Jamie requires more attention. On our long practice runs, half marathons and marathons, Katie Raab-Reed sometimes runs with us. Katie is a trained autism behavior specialist and experienced runner. During these practices and long races she assists me in diminishing his anxiety if it occurs. We all enjoy running together as a team. And, oftentimes, after 10 miles in, his whole demeanor changes and a visible

transformation appears He can become a calm, focused, athlete with a running style that is so relaxed and unforced; he can easily finish strong with endurance to spare.

When I run with Jamie, my biggest competition is not my peers in my age group. Rather it is the pretty young girls, preferably blond, with a swooshing ponytail, that Jamie will suddenly gravitate to, and either run alongside, or run behind. He usually says “hi” as he spots the girls, and they often respond with a “hi” back to him. For an instant they may not realize that he is autistic, just a handsome young runner offering a friendly exchange Jamie also enjoys the social aspect of stopping at the water stops. This is a fun experience for him, saying “hi” to the volunteers handing out water and Gatorade, but it does result in a slower pace than his potential. However, for his enjoyment, I let him decide how fast he wants to run. When I run with Jamie I feel as if this is our time together, engaged in an awesome experience, While I cannot enjoy fatherly-son conversations with Jim about sports or movies; running brings us closer. And as we cross the finish line together, well, that moment is the ultimate high for me. Whether our goal is a 5K or a marathon, we did it together, as father and son. And that is my reward.

I feel very strongly that safety is paramount. While promoting independence may be appropriate for higher functioning individuals, with those who are low on the spectrum it is only prudent to keep them close while running to address the unexpected and safely handle any situation that may arise.

Being a father and coach to my incredibly athletic, but severely autistic son, seems an impossible responsibility for me, and I do question my ability to do it successfully every practice and race we attempt. But in the end, this has been both rewarding and satisfying for us as a family. Running has brought us all together with a common endeavor with many accomplishments to boast about. And as an added bonus we are all enjoying a physically active lifestyle together.

Allan has been training Jamie since 2008