

## Family Finds Outlet In Competitive Races

By Cailin Riley

For some people, simply finishing a race—whether it be a 5K or marathon—is an accomplishment worth celebrating. There is perhaps no one who personifies this better than the Schneider family of Great Neck.

Husband and wife Robyn and Allan Schneider were at the Hamptons Marathon and Half-Marathon in Springs on Saturday morning, arriving bright and early more than an hour before race time with their twin sons, Jamie and Alex. Mrs. Schneider waited patiently at the finish line, camera in hand, for her son Alex to finish the 13.1-mile half-marathon with his running partner, Kevin McDermott. Later on, Jamie and Mr. Schneider crossed the finish together, sweating, tired and spent but with the sense of accomplishment and triumph they have discovered makes running a worthwhile pursuit.

Jamie and Alex were both born to be runners, it seems. Mr. Schneider says he remembers them chasing him at the beach as children and both parents recall that their teachers in school pointed out how much the boys seemed to enjoy running endlessly in circles around the gym. But Jamie and Alex were also born with autism. The 19-year-old twins are low on the spectrum, according to their parents, and struggle with everyday tasks that most people take for granted. But in the world of competitive running, they have certainly found their niche. Alex won his age group in the halfmarathon on Saturday, finishing in 1:30:38 (6:55 pace). The 50-year-old Mc-Dermott was at his side, as he is in every race, making sure Alex follows the course properly while offering any other type of support he may need. Alex and McDermott finished 21st and 22nd, respectively, with McDermott clocking in at the same time.

Jamie and Mr. Schneider finished farther back, although Mr. Schneider is adamant that his son is capable of running a much faster time. The father son duo crossed the finish line in 2:37:12 (12:00 pace). The fact that Mr. Schneider was even competing was an impressive feat, considering he suffers from multiple sclerosis, an affliction that makes running painful for him.

It seems that overcoming adversity has become a trademark of the Schneider family and through it all they've maintained a positive attitude. Rather than dealing with the news of their childrens' autism by wallowing in self-pity, they were proactive, chartering a school for children with autism—The Genesis School in Plainview—and also creating the Blazing Trails 4-Autism 4-Mile Run, which will take place for the second time on Sunday, November 8, at Great Neck South High School. Mrs. Schneider planned and put together the race last year while she was in chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer.

Despite all the obstacles life has thrown at their family, both Mr. and Mrs. Schneider agree that finding running as an outlet for their boys was one of the happiest discoveries of their lives.

"It's so natural to them and they have so much energy, so it's a great release," Mrs. Schneider said before the marathon last week. "They're always happy and smiling."

Alex, in particular, took to running so quickly that in a short time, he became too fast for Mr. Schneider to run with. Because the boys cannot run alone, finding someone who could not only keep pace with Alex but also adapt to his behaviors and needs and who, in turn, Alex would feel comfortable with, was a challenge for the Schneiders. Both boys initially were part of the Rolling Thunder running club for children and adults with developmental disabilities and through that group, they met Mc-Dermott, who lives in West Islip. The Schneiders describe McDermott as an "amazing" person who volunteers his time during the week to go on training runs with Alex and also runs with him in competitive road races, which the Schneiders attend on a nearly weekly basis. When McDermott isn't available for training runs, Mrs. Schneider rides her bike alongside her son.

Because both Alex and Jamie are very limited in terms of verbal communication, running with them can be challenging at times and Mr. and Mrs. Schneider say that being able to pick up on their non-verbal cues that something may be amiss, such as a cramp or any type of discomfort or frustration, is crucial. But they agree that

"It's like nothing else is going on in the world," she said. "That's our time together. They're doing something they enjoy so much and it's just a wonderful feeling."

Mr. Schneider admitted that, at the age of 56 and with his health limitations, he's not sure how many more races he has under his belt, but he's optimistic that he won't have to give it up any time soon.

"I'm hoping to continue for at least another two years," he said. "I want to make the most of it while I can."

Mr. and Mrs. Schneider admit that they probably never would have had much of an interest in distance running if it weren't for their sons' love of the sport. But they've embraced it as a solidifying force for their family. And, she added, after all they've been through, they've found a new appreciation for life.

"It really inspired us because of how much they enjoy it," Mrs. Schneider said, referring to her family's health battles as "an awakening."

"You really want to enjoy every moment you spend with your family," she said. "We always overextend ourselves for the boys because we want them to be happy and healthy and get the most out of what they enjoy."



Alex Schneider, left, has been winning races with Kevin McDermott at his side.



Jamie Schneider crosses the finish line in the Hamptons Half-Marathon with his father, Allan Schneider, on Saturday in Springs. **CAILIN RILEY**