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ALEX SCHNEIDER HAS OVERCOME CHALLENGES OF AUTISM TO REACH HIS MARATHON PEAK WITH HELP FROM HIS TRAINERS

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RUNNING MATES

MARISOL DIAZ-GORDON



Guide runner and coach Boyd Carrington, center left, checks the watch of runner Alex Schneider, in blue shirt, at the start of the Massapequa 5k Firecracker race.

Making strides

This Great Neck man on the spectrum shows his talent and outruns expectations

BY JOHN HANC
Special to Newsday

Gradually, almost imperceptibly, his Saucony running shoes gliding across the ground, Alex “Alie” Schneider pulled abreast of his guide runner, Sal Nastasi.

The two were jogging on the bike path adjacent to Bethpage State Parkway on a Wednesday morning in late June. As they passed walkers, bikers and bird-watchers along the popular trail, Nastasi flashed a knowing grin when Schneider — who had been running directly behind him — smoothly accelerated again, until he was a few yards ahead.

“Alie,” Nastasi said, clearly and firmly. “Slow.”

Schneider responded immediately, and his stride shortened as he drifted back.

Nastasi, 38, laughed. “He always wants to go fast,” said Nastasi, of Massapequa Park.

Indeed, at 5 feet, 10 inches tall and a lean 125 pounds, Schneider, 28, seems born to run — rapidly. He completed the New York City Marathon in November in an impressive time of 2:50:3. In April, braving some of the worst weather conditions in the 122-year history of the event, he completed the



MARISOL DIAZ-GORDON



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Schneider, of Great Neck, cools down after completing the Massapequa 5k Firecracker race. He also ran in the New York and Boston marathons.



ON THE COVER. Alex Schneider is flanked by guide runners Boyd Carrington, left, of Amityville and Sal Nastasi of Massapequa Park.



Allan Schneider gets a bike for his wife, Robyn, before she accompanies their son in a pre-race warmup.

MARISOL DIAZ-GORDON

Boston Marathon in a (for him) disappointing time of 2:56. A few weeks later, at the Long Island Half Marathon on May 6, Schneider rebounded, finishing fifth overall out of 2,100 participants. In that race, accompanied by his other guide runner and coach, Boyd Carrington, Schneider covered the 13.1-mile distance in a time of 1:16:30 (nearly an hour faster than the average time of all those who completed the race).

This summer, Schneider continues to tear up the local road racing circuit. Now training and racing with Nastasi and Carrington, he is in the company of two of the fastest runners in Nassau and Suffolk counties.

His guide runners, both of

whom were at Schneider's side for the New York and Boston marathons, are also sensitive and caring individuals.

They guide him for a reason: Schneider is profoundly autistic. Though he is unable to speak, probably doesn't understand the concept of elapsed time and is incapable of even lacing his shoes, Schneider possesses an athletic gift that

his parents and mentors like Nastasi and Carrington have nurtured — while finding themselves transformed by the experience of spending hours with someone who resides in the mysterious realm of the spectrum.

Despite all that, Schneider is eminently coachable. "He does whatever you ask, he doesn't complain, he doesn't have

attitude," said Carrington, 45, of Amityville, a certified coach who has worked one-on-one with many runners. "His attitude is to run."

And run hard. Which is why Nastasi tried to keep Schneider's pace in check during their recent run on the bike path; a day that, in the context of his training week, was supposed to be easier than the

higher-intensity session they had run the day before.

Nastasi is convinced Schneider understands a lot more than his slightly quizzical expression would lead one to believe. He'll often talk to him while they log the miles together. "I'll say, 'It's a nice day today,' and I'll tell him about

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MARISOL DIAZ-GORDON

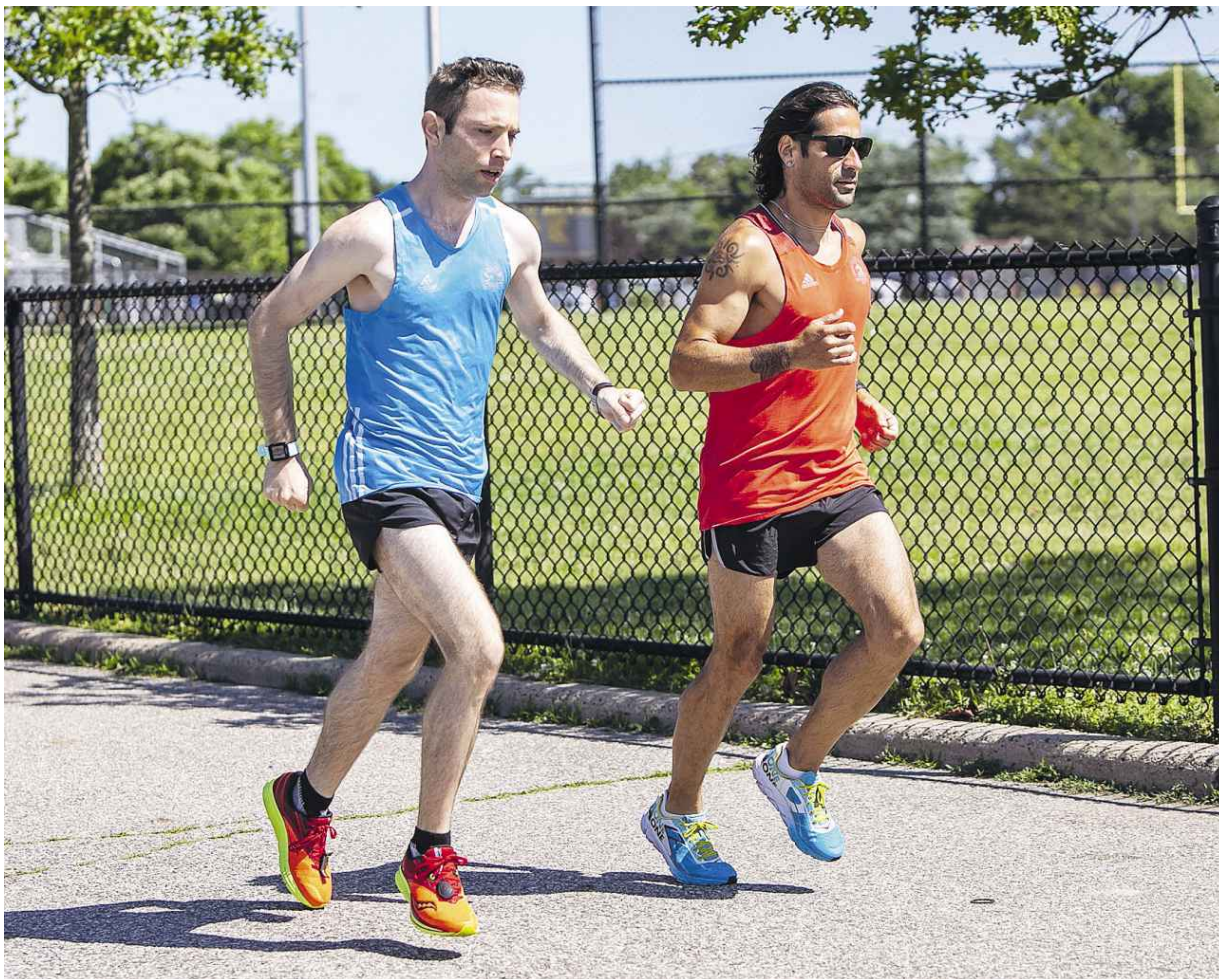


MARISOL DIAZ-GORDON

THE PACE. Alex Schneider is exhorted by his coach, Boyd Carrington.

THE RACE. Carrington exults as Schneider completes the race, finishing 5th overall.

Outrunning expectations



MARISOL DIAZ-GORDON



MARISOL DIAZ-GORDON

Schneider, far left, trains with guide runner Sal Nastasi at John J. Burns Park in Massapequa Park. Above, they do a cool-down stretch afterward.

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what my kids are doing, or whatever errands I have to do after our run," Nastasi said. "Sometimes I get the sense that he's listening."

While much of his original training was done with Kevin McDermott, a longtime runner from East Islip who moved out of state last summer, Schneider seems very comfortable with his current mentors. He is also unfazed by many of the distractions around him. On the bike path, dogs barked and bikes whizzed by, but Schneider remained unflappable and kept his eyes firmly on the road ahead.



THE GRACE. The runners embrace after completing the Massapequa 5k Firecracker.



With Carrington at his side, Schneider proudly holds the plaque he received for finishing in second place in the 25-29 age group.

TIME ON THE ROADS

Such single-mindedness is a hallmark of Schneider's condition. "A number of us do have great focus," said Stephen Shore, PhD, a professor of special education at Adelphi University in Garden City who has Asperger's Syndrome. "When we focus on something, that becomes the entire world."

For Schneider, running isn't his entire world. He also plays piano, swims and spends part of every weekday at the adult program at the Genesis School,

an East Meadow facility for autistic individuals that Alie has attended since he was a child.

Still, nothing brings him greater pleasure than his time on the roads.

Running has also helped his twin brother, Jamie. Although not as fast as Alie, Jamie runs regularly. And he, too, is severely autistic.

Their proclivity for a sport that demands endurance might be attributed in part to their parents' endurance of

spirit. At around the same time the then-young twins were diagnosed with autism, their father, Allan Schneider, 66, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, a disease that affects the central nervous system and can result in numbness, muscle weakness and vision problems.

"I was scared — terrified," Robyn Schneider wrote in her 2015 memoir, "Silent Running: Our Family's Journey to the Finish Line with Autism" (Triumph Books, April 2015;



Robyn Schneider shares a touching moment with son Alex.

A mother remembers

In this excerpt from her 2015 memoir, Robyn Schneider recounts the first time her autistic twins, Alie and Jamie, went for a run, back in 2005. She and her husband, Allan, had brought the boys, then 15 years old, to Eisenhower Park to meet with two coaches from Rolling Thunder, the running group for special-needs individuals. The coaches suggested that Robyn and Allan allow them to go for a run with the boys on their own.

"I wasn't sure how they would manage that, exactly, but it felt like time to let go, to loosen our grip a little. We told Shanthy and Mike to watch for specific behaviors, such as Alie's arm flapping and Jamie's loud vocalizing, which could mean they were upset about something. Shanthy and Mike nodded, not seeming at all nervous.

The moment they ran out of sight, it felt as though I'd been punched in the stomach. Allan and I paced back and forth in the parking lot. Of course they'd only been gone for a few minutes, but it

felt like hours to both of us. We couldn't see them and I kept thinking, Please let them be okay. Why aren't they back yet?

I was starting to panic. "Maybe this was a mistake," I said.

"I know," Allan said. His brow was furrowed, and I could tell he was just as nervous as I was.

Then suddenly they came around the bend. Alie was out front, and he was flying. Then came Jamie and Mike and Shanthy. When the boys came to a stop in front of us, they both looked euphoric, smiling like we'd never seen before. Allan and I pulled them into tight hugs.

"They're naturals!" Mike said, breathing hard. "I've been coaching with the club for years and I've never seen anything like it, especially Alie."

Excerpted from "Silent Running: Our Family's Journey to the Finish Line with Autism," by Robyn K. Schneider with Kate Hopper. For more information on the book and on Alie Schneider, visit autismrunners.com

\$24.95). "But instead of letting that fear paralyze me, it propelled me into action. . . . We will do everything humanly possible for Alie and Jamie, and we will start doing it now."

That search for activities the twins could enjoy and safely partake in eventually took them to Rolling Thunder, a Shirley-based running team for special-needs people. It became apparent that Alie, in particular, had a gift for the sport.

Athletic prowess is not typically associated with those on the spectrum, and, according to Shore, this could be a bit of stereotyping. "We always hear about these super geeks in IT and that's all well and good," he said. "My question is, 'What about everybody else?' And the everybody else are those who have skills in the arts or athletics, like this young man."

Indeed, Schneider is not the

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Born to run and inspire

COVER STORY from E6

only outstanding autistic runner on Long Island. Mikey Brannigan, 21, of East Northport, was a record-setting track runner at Northport High School, and later won the gold medal in the 1,500 meters at the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio. He, too, is autistic, although there the comparisons end. Brannigan is high-functioning: He converses with others; he can read; he has his own Facebook page.

Alie and Jamie Schneider live in a very different world. And yet, it is one in which the simple motion of putting one foot in front of the other has made a significant difference, especially for Alie.

"Running has helped in every single way you can imagine," his father said. "The sad reality is that things that most young men are interested in — computers, women, driving a car — these are not going to be part of his life. But the running gives him focus and purpose."

Robyn Schneider, 62, agrees. "It's hard to know for sure because he can't tell me, but after a run he's in a calm place, he's in a happy place, he loves the camaraderie," she said.

And while he may not understand the concept of running faster or even elapsed time, Schneider seems to enjoy getting recognized for his ability. After most of his races, he is usually called up onto a stage to receive a medal for his fast finishes.

"When he goes onstage, he smiles for the camera," his mother said.

The entire family has benefited from this. In addition to their sons, Robyn and Allan both started jogging — and Allan credits his improved fitness over the past decade for helping stop the progression of his MS.

REALIZING HIS POTENTIAL

Schneider, who has completed 18 marathons, is just reaching his peak as a distance runner, many of whom have their best performances in their



Alex Schneider, right, and his twin brother, Jamie, after the Massapequa 5k Firecracker.



Guide runner and coach Boyd Carrington lends a hand to Schneider after the Massapequa 5k Firecracker race in June.

late 20s and early 30s. Carrington said he thinks Schneider has the talent to run faster than 2:30 for the marathon, a strong time for any runner, much less one who cannot speak in complete sentences or write his own name.

Still, the challenge of working with someone like Schneider to help him realize his potential is much greater than either Carrington or Nastasi envisioned.

"I didn't understand how much it would entail," acknowledged Carrington, who had been recommended to Robyn Schneider by her son's original coach, McDermott. "I thought it would be show up at the race and run with him."

Instead, in planning out his charge's training program, Carrington has taken on a task for which there is no rulebook and few precedents. Consider the issue of injury: Schneider cannot tell Nastasi and Carrington he is in pain, so they are always on the lookout for slight changes in Schneider's gait or running mechanics that would suggest a problem.

Despite the challenges, both Carrington and Nastasi have embraced the experience.

"It's rewarding on so many levels," Carrington said. "It's given me more patience, even with my own kids. It gives me an additional set of problem-solving skills."

Nastasi, a professional musi-

cian, shoulders Schneider's training mileage during the week (Carrington runs with him on weekends). "It's fascinating to see how he learns," Nastasi said.

Schneider's ability to comply was exhibited during the recent training run on the Bethpage Bikeway Trail. When Schneider pulled ahead of Nastasi yet again (this time near the point where the path passes Mansfield Park in Massapequa), Nastasi let him go — even though he was headed directly toward the bike path's intersection with Linden Street, a heavily trafficked road.

Nastasi was unperturbed as Schneider disappeared around

a turn. "He'll be fine," Nastasi said. "He knows exactly what to do."

Sure enough, when Nastasi turned a bend on the path just 50 feet from Linden Street, he found Schneider standing to the side of the path at attention, like a soldier awaiting further orders.

"See?" Nastasi said and smiled. "He knows he can't cross the street alone."

Taking Schneider gently by the wrist, Nastasi guided him across the street as cars stopped. Nastasi waved acknowledgments of thanks to the drivers, and the two continued running.

Which is really all that Schneider seems to need.



Carrington, left, Schneider and Sal Nastasi brave pelting rain, strong headwinds and freezing temperatures in this year's Boston Marathon in April.