

RUNNER'S[®] WORLD

For Boston Qualifier With Autism, Running Opened up a New World

With help from his pacers, Alex “Alie” Schneider aims to run under 2:45 on Marathon Monday.

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BY JOHN HANC



COURTESY OF ROBYN K. SCHNEIDER

During one of their first training runs together along a wooded bike path in central Long Island, Sal Nastasi explained to his running partner, Alex “Alie” Schneider, how they could help each other.

“I said, ‘I’m going to teach you about speed, and you’re going to teach me about toughness,’” Nastasi said.

A former 1:52, All-New England 800-meter runner at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, and a 2:35 marathoner himself, Nastasi knows something about fortitude and grit. Still, he admits he’s not in Schneider’s league.

“He has a talent I wish I had,” said Nastasi, 38. “He’s in the moment, not thinking ahead, not worrying. He’s unbelievably focused. It’s what all of us as competitive runners wish we could do.”

Schneider, 27, did not respond to Nastasi’s words of praise on that run. That’s because Schneider is a runner with autism. He is unable to speak. But on Monday at the Boston Marathon, Nastasi and Schneider’s coach, Boyd Carrington, also from Long Island, will test the ever-expanding limits of his talents as they attempt to pace him to a sub-2:45 marathon.

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In a sense, this potential Boston breakthrough is the culmination of a life and running career documented in *Silent Running: Our Family’s Journey to the Finish Line with Autism*, a 2015 memoir by Schneider’s mother, Robyn K. Schneider.

For Robyn and her husband, Allan, running became their key to unlocking the silent, distant, and frightening world of severe autism that Alex and his twin brother, Jamie, have lived with since they were diagnosed at 21 months of age. It was an often-chaotic existence, in which there was constant worry that the boys would hurt themselves or others.

But in 2005, a marathon-running friend of theirs suggested that the boys, then 15, might do well in the structure and discipline of distance running. The Schneiders agreed, but privately, they had doubts.

They connected with Rolling Thunder, a running club for those with special needs. At a local park one weekend, they remember watching the boys head off with two guide runners. “The moment they ran out of sight, it felt like I’d been punched in the stomach,” Robyn wrote.

But running worked its magic—and in particularly powerful ways on these two boys. It was evident when they returned from their brief jaunt that day. “There was no question about how they felt about running,” Robyn said. “They were beaming.”

In the months ahead, Alie just kept getting faster and faster. (Although not as proficient as his brother, Jamie still runs with his parents, who took up the sport after their boys.)

The Schneiders had to find local individuals who had the time, patience, and intelligence—not to mention trustworthiness—to take on the challenge of running with their sons. They found a local runner named Kevin McDermott, who had coached with Rolling Thunder. Working as a private coach, McDermott

successfully guided Alie through many miles and numerous races. In 2010, with McDermott pacing him, he ran his first marathon in a time of 3:27:36.

Last year, when McDermott moved out of state, the reins were handed over to Carrington, 45. “To be honest, I didn’t understand how much it would entail,” Carrington said. “I thought [I would just] show up at the race, and run with him.” Running with Alie, however, is very different. He is completely dependent on others.

But Carrington discovered, as well as Nastasi—who joined what they now call Team SAlieBoyd in November—that with a little help, Alie is capable of learning and accomplishing great things when he runs. One recent example is when Nastasi paced the now 27-year-old through the second half of the NYC Marathon, which Alie completed in 2:50:03.

