

Kevin McDermott, Alex's Coach

I thought nobody, and I mean nobody, looked forward to a run as much as I did – until I met Alie. I don't know much about autism, but I know Alie's got it and got it bad. Unlike most of my friends with autism, many of whom have girlfriends, boyfriends, drive cars, hold down jobs, are married even, Alie most likely won't ever experience any of these. And though he can assemble one thousand piece puzzles (never looks at the box), play the piano, and run 18 minute 5K's; he can't safely cross a street by himself. But three days a week he experiences a runner's high that few get to feel.

We first crossed paths about five years ago when as a coach for Rolling Thunder, a special needs running club, I heard about this 15 year old who couldn't run without a guide. Nothing extraordinary there except that he was burning through our volunteer coaches, leaving injured runners in his wake. It wasn't that he was in such exceptional shape (yet), but that he had no sense of pace and began all his runs fast and then would randomly throw in surges. It wasn't long before the sight of Alie and a running partner literally 'holding on' for dear life became the norm. Some of our coaches still tell of the first (and last) race they ever entered with Alie and how long they had to deal with the residual pain. Around this time I had put in about three years of running and discovered I had a penchant for this sort of stuff. I had read everything I could get my hands on running related and found it all fascinating. I think I was most drawn to the subject of exercise physiology because though labeled as a 'science' it was an inexact science at best. My wife indulged this fad of mine and allowed me to flit off to Rutgers University for some training certification. I was getting faster and pretty full of myself as I would regularly come home with my 3rd place age group trinkets. And now this Alie kid had fallen into my lap. I would be the one to break this galloping stallion!

Fast forward two years and there I am grasping the back of Alie's shirt and holding on for dear life just like those before me. It wasn't enough that I could hold a seven minute mile pace all day long or that I knew the most effective and efficient ways to train, Alie had autism and wasn't interested in my credentials as a running coach. Nor was he interested that based on all measures, I was still in better running shape than he was. Running was a compulsion for him and he just wanted to GO! Eventually we just settled on what now seems the only obvious solution,

and that was to have Alie run behind me. It took Alie awhile to realize I meant business with this new running arrangement, but 2 1/2 years later it's working well for both of us. No longer do we cut workouts short because of our uneven pacing and now I can tailor workouts exactly to Alie's specifications by controlling the speed from up front. Probably the best of all, it's allowed Alie to let me do the 'work' so that he can just go along for the ride so to speak. Alie loves to run. He is what I would call a Zen runner. It's the pure experience or more likely the sensation of running which I believe drives his fervent desire. Especially early on in our runs (first 4 -6 miles), Alie seems to get lost in the passing scenery. He'll most often run with his head turned 45 degrees to the right, taking in the trees moving rapidly by. Sunny days provide the most stimulus as the light coming through the trees provides a strobe like effect on our morning & afternoon runs. Like my children sitting behind me in the car commenting on how fast things are moving by, Alie is experiencing' the same run I am on in a more stimulating way.

So for Alie, the longer the run the better. No repeat 200 meter repetitions on the track for him. As a matter of fact he'll have nothing to do with running on a track and has made it perfectly clear. So while talented enough to compete in such track events, it's not an option. It's strictly road races for us, not a problem here on Long Island where every weekend one can find a race where the entry fee goes to a great cause. As much as Alie enjoys our training runs, he's come to enjoy racing even more. I think he can sense all the excitement on race morning right from the moment he gets out of bed. You can feel the energy crackling off him like electricity when he's sporting a bib with his race number on it. Despite the fact he is so thrilled to be racing, he'll most often be on his best behavior the morning of a race, displaying much more patience and self control than his usual kinetic self. While the other hundreds of racers are twitching nervously on the starting line, Alie is smiling coolly. Perhaps he knows that although he's in for a grueling physical experience, he's not as fixated on a finishing time or establishing a new p.r. like the rest of the type A personalities surrounding him.

Early on in anyone's running, gains in fitness can be had simply by lacing them up and heading out the door. Eventually one will require additional training stimulus in order to gain any additional fitness. A training plan eventually needs to be highly individualized as we don't all respond the same way to the same training. Additionally, each runner is motivated in

different ways and may have disparate goals. If we could get inside Alie's head, what would we learn to be 'his' running goals? First and foremost it seems as if Alie simply loves to run. Our first goal then is to have Alie run as often as possible. Unfortunately we live just over an hour apart and three days/week is the most we can get together what with his school schedule, my work schedule, etc... If we are just getting in a run every other day at the most, we can immediately remove what some call 'recovery' runs from our schedule. Alie's recovery happens on the days he's not running. Since he enjoys the experience of running, we've pushed the duration of most all our runs to at least 90 minutes. For variety and training stimulus we occasionally break these longer runs into mile or two mile repeats at a faster speed. Keeping it simple while focusing on what Alie enjoys most is paramount. Setting up a running program for runners with autism is challenging enough without introducing training components that the athlete doesn't understand the purpose of, may have no interest in doing, or simply doesn't have the physical ability to perform. I am a big proponent of doing drills, plyometrics and core work, but Alie has shown a disdain for all these and running is not rocket science. Unless we are training elite athletes, these 'extras' are not paramount. All runners' performances will improve over time simply by progressively running further and faster over time and that suits Alie just fine.

The real key to improved running is consistent training and that can only be accomplished by staying injury free. This becomes even more consequential for the athlete with autism. Many like Alie and his twin brother Jamie are not able to communicate conventionally and may not express or convey that they are experiencing discomfort or pain. Especially with Alie, who badly cut the underside of his toe less than a week before the Boston Marathon, but said nothing. If not for the puddle of blood discovered by his parents, it may not have been noticed in time to be properly addressed so that he could be on that starting line in Hopkinton, Mass. Alie seems to have an almost muted sense of pain (perhaps one factor contributing to his prowess as a distance runner, a subject I would love to research some day) and only had an imperceptible limp three years ago when while running for the local High School Cross Country team, we ramped up his mileage too fast and he suffered a stress fracture.

I know that injuries from over training may not be a concern for many as they are having trouble convincing their loved one with autism to run at all. At a cross country clinic Rolling Thunder hosts, I heard a mother reminding her son that a chocolate, peanut butter cake awaited him if he saw the camp through to Friday. Another athlete in our club showed little interest in going beyond two or three miles until his parents revealed to us his love for comic books. Now he'll run all day as long as you engage him in conversation about his super heroes. Gleaning special interests, triggers and cues from those who know the athlete most is best done before initiating a running program.

At this same running clinic I was asked by a woman from a local TV station why I thought all this running was beneficial for these young men and women with special needs and three reasons immediately came to mind. First of all it's healthy. For me it's the best use of one's time as nothing comes close to running for deriving myriad health benefits. Secondly, it makes one more "agreeable" (just ask my family). Alie is far more relaxed, compliant and simply easier to be around after a good workout. And maybe not as easy to quantify; being in shape, losing weight, feeling fit, seeing an eight mile run through to the finish, and looking good are great for anyone's confidence and self esteem.

Ultimately it comes down to who you are. Alie is not defined by his autism. First and foremost he is a runner. That's who he is. Running is not a means to an end for Alie. It's not the destination for him, but the act of running itself, the journey. Alie is most in his element after a race, not in a classroom with other students with autism. If you could capture the 'essence' of Alie in a photograph, it would be one of the many hanging throughout his house where he is holding a first place trophy in one hand and accepting high fives from his competitors with the other.

Kevin has been training Alex since 2006