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## Middletown man takes son through Olympic-distance events

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Dave Ferrell (right) stands in the pool with his son Blake while training for several Olympic-length triathlons. / STAFF FILE



Written by  
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Blake Ferrell can't walk without assistance. He doesn't talk. He doesn't feed or dress himself.

But on July 24, Blake will feel the water on his skin as he glides on Mercer Lake, feel the wind on his face as he zips through the bike course, and see and hear the elation of the crowd as he crosses the finish line.

Sure, Blake has cerebral palsy and epilepsy, but he's going to be at Mercer County Park to take part in the New Jersey State Olympic Triathlon anyway — because his father, Dave, is going to make it so.

"This is not about me," said Dave Ferrell, a 50-year-old financial advisor from Middletown. "It's about Blake being able to experience life in a whole new way. I'm going to do the triathlon and Blake gets to use my body for a day."

Dave Ferrell's plan is quite extraordinary. He's going to pull or push his 13-year-old son for the entire distance of the Olympic-distance triathlon.

That's right. Ferrell is going to swim while towing Blake in an inflatable boat for 1.5 kilometers, then ride 40 kilometers on his bike while pulling Blake in a special carrier, and finish the grueling race with 10 kilometers of running and pushing Blake in a racing wheelchair.

Last year, Dave pushed and pulled Blake through several triathlons but they were all "sprint" races. This year marked the first time Dave took on Olympic-distance events. In May, Dave and Blake blazed through the Red Bank Olympic Triathlon in 1:52:52.2.

"When I heard what Dave was doing, I was astonished," said Sheri Wright, branch manager of Morgan Stanley Smith Barney in Red Bank, where Dave works. "I said to him, 'You're doing what?' and then I asked how I could support this."

Wright's level of support included getting Morgan Stanley Smith Barney to sponsor several local races, including the Kids Triathlon for Bob Kelleher, held in Rumson June 12, and the Cheesquake Youth Triathlon, held two weeks ago in Matawan. She tried to get Ferrell to accept direct sponsorship but he declined.

"I really didn't want any money because this whole thing is between me, my son and my family," he said. "I didn't want this to get commercialized. But I've loosened up a bit. I've received some help in other areas that do help keep costs down."

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One of those areas was utilizing the services of a local bike shop that helped Dave customize the bike carrier he wanted to use for Blake. Another company helped customize the racer chair.

"I've had a lot of support from many people within the community," he said. "I've come across a lot of cooperative, helpful people along the way."

In order to maintain a safe endeavor for Blake everytime out on the course, Ferrell enlists the help of a minimum of a half-dozen friends and relatives who help monitor Blake while Dave churns through each portion of the race.

"We have people following us in the water and on the bike course, because, obviously, I can't see Blake behind me," he said. "The last thing we want is for something to go wrong back there with Blake. Safety's first with us."

One of those helpers is Ferrell's youngest son, Luke, who is 9. When Ferrell made the decision to start training for triathlons on Dec. 4, 2009, Luke immediately got involved. The Ferrell team since has been dubbed "Team LB" ... translation, Team Luke and Blake.

"It means a lot to be part of it," said Luke, who often rides during the bike portion of a race. "It's great that Dad can do it and that Blake can be involved. It's kind of exhausting, but it's fun."

Another one of those helpful people has been Dave's coach, Moira Horan, who not only has been preparing Dave for competition, but has become intricately involved in helping Luke develop his skills as well.

"Moira has become more involved than originally planned," Dave Ferrell said. "Luke comes with me to open-water swims and she's been showing him a lot of things, helping him out. She's been great, and she's been a huge help to both me and Luke. Moira's just a great person."

Not surprisingly, Dave's wife, Colleen, has been behind him from the beginning, knowing Blake would enjoy the experiences.

"At first, we had to figure it all out as we went along," she said. "But it's all panned out really well. We just developed a new routine. It's all about inclusion for Blake, and getting him out into the community to experience life like any other child.

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"When Blake sits and moves his head, it means he's happy and having a good time. And when Dave pushes him across the finish line, and I see Blake's head moving from side to side, I'm just so proud and excited for them."

Luke believes he may someday take over the reins from his father.

"I'll take his bike from him and do the same thing," he said. "I would definitely do it for Blake."

Dave Ferrell said he'd be willing to do for other special needs children what he does for Blake, but also would encourage their parents to give it a try as well.

"I know what Blake gets out of it and it would be great to see other parents of special needs kids do something like this," he said. "I don't consider myself an athlete, so if I can do this I'm sure there are others out there who can do it too."

Dave and Colleen Ferrell both agreed it would be a wonderful occasion when the first triathlon for special needs kids and their parents, all pushing or pulling their youngsters, can take place.

"It would take a lot of organization and money to pull it off," Dave Ferrell said. "But that would be awesome."