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Middletown father and son cross finish lines together

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David Ferrell (l) and his son, Blake, complete the swimming portion of a triathlon, which also includes cycling and running. They draw cheers at every triathlon they compete in. When David Ferrell crossed the finish line among the final group of 50 finishers out of the 600 who entered in the Long Branch triathlon on July 14, he heard some cheers that sounded more like those for the top finishers.

Those cheers weren't just for the 52-year-old Middletown resident, though. They were also for his 16-year-old son, Blake, who was sitting in the front car that his father pushed in the 10-kilometer run segment. Blake was waving his arms like he always does to show the enthusiasm of a winner.

There also is a 1-mile swim and a 25-mile bike race, and the father and son have shared the grueling experience of 10 triathlons over the past two years, along with two half-marathons and a number of 10K and 5K races.

David competes with deep conviction. A rare genetic disorder that Blake has endured throughout his life was finally diagnosed in April, caused by a mutation of a gene that triggered as many as 200 seizures a month before medication limited them to 10 monthly.

“He is very challenged physically and extremely delayed cognitively, and [he] has intractable epilepsy,” David said.

Blake's is one of only 40 reported cases worldwide. It has restricted him to a special motorized chair and blocked his speech, but it hasn't stopped him from sharing the experience of competing with his dad, who said he also was 25 pounds overweight when he started.

“Everybody wants their kids recognized and successful in what they do,” David said. “This is my way to give that experience to my son. I stay in shape, my family is involved and my company [Morgan Stanley, where he is a financial officer in the Red Bank office] supports me. It jazzes me a lot.”

More spectators, as well as athletes, have recognized the pair in competition — some by the shirts they wear that bear the logo “Team LB,” the letters of the first names of sons Blake and younger son Luke, 11, who is in perfect health and will be a sixth-grader at Bayshore Middle School this fall. Luke has joined them at times in races.

They also wear the logo of Morgan Stanley, which David said he was initially hesitant to include because he thought it would look like patronage of his office. But he has been so moved by the company’s support and sponsorship that he decided to include it.

Six adults are part of the team, and they monitor Blake along the three events in case he has a seizure.

“We hear, ‘Way to go,’ and get highfives. It’s been unbelievable seeing people who recognize my son now,” David said.

“The response from the community has been amazing,” David said in his online memoir, “Living the Dream.” “From the event directors to the volunteers to the spectators, everyone loves to see Blake in the races.” In the triathlon, in which Long Branch holds regular events during the summer, David tows Blake in the swim portion using an inflatable boat, pulls him in a carrier behind his bike in the bicycle portion and finally pushes Blake in a specially outfitted wheelchair.

It’s a challenge. David said he loses time during the changeovers from one event to another because he has to do more things to accommodate Blake than other triathletes running alone. But finishing is the most important part for the father and his son, who is a student at Hawkswood School in Eatontown.

“Blake can show emotion. But when we started, my wife Colleen said that Blake was not showing a lot of emotion, that in the bike and running part, he seemed calm,” Ferrell said. “But when he’s excited, he waves his arms, like when we finish. Sometimes he does that when we pass other runners, but I tell him not to do that [for sportsmanship].”

Certainly, Blake shares the excitement of finishing that his dad feels after the hard training he puts in throughout the year. David prepares by running at Thompson Park in Lincroft or at Sandy Hook — sometimes with Blake in the chair, and other times with sandbags or weights in an empty wheelchair to simulate Blake’s 110-pound weight when Blake doesn’t go. David swims at the Atlantic Club pool with a parachute for resistance, and when he gets on a bicycle, he said he cranks the gears high to make him work harder on his pedals.

David said he first got the idea to compete with his son in triathlons while watching an ESPN broadcast of an Ironman Triathlon from Hawaii. He learned that a family in Massachusetts was

doing the same thing he would go on to do — a dad competing with his physically and cognitively challenged son in triathlons.

“I thought, ‘How cool would that be?’ ” David said. “I was a lifeguard in my younger days and I thought, ‘I could swim. This is not big deal.’ But it’s a big deal.”

Blake’s ordeal has been a lifelong struggle. He was born six weeks premature and began having seizures at 10 months. His parents took him to the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia for a battery of metabolic and genetic tests with MRIs and EEGs, which detected seizures. This led to seizure medication and early intervention of physical, speech and occupational therapies, according to David. Blake could not sit up, walk or speak at age 2, and the parents turned to the Kennedy Krieger Institute at Johns Hopkins University, which helps individuals with a range of developmental disorders.

At 5 years old, Blake’s seizures seemed under control, and he was taken off medication. He was able to start talking and do some things physically, such as walking. His talking improved, but four years later, the seizures returned and worsened to the peak of 200 a month — until two medications and a vagus nerve stimulator brought them under control. By that time, Blake lost the speech he had built up and some of his physical abilities. He has been able to play basketball, baseball and bowl in the Challenger Youth Sports League, and has even gone horseback riding and swimming.

But David felt there could be more of an experience for his son and decided from there to embark on his unique commitment. He reached out to the triathlon club, the Sandy Hookers. Although they have run at Long Branch, David said they especially enjoy the Red Bank Triathlon in late May.

At his age, David said he is not sure how long he’ll be competing.

“I talked to my son, Luke, about it for when that time comes, and he said, ‘I’ll do it for Blake.’ ”