

THE TWO RIVER TIMES™

Team LB: Not Your Average Triathletes

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MIDDLETOWN – Like most triathletes, Dave Ferrell knows what it takes to go the extra mile.

After five years of competing in triathlons, this 53-year-old, husband, father of two and businessman from Middletown understands the hard work and discipline involved in training for and competing in these grueling races. However, going the extra mile has a whole different meaning for Ferrell.

When he runs, swims, and bikes, Ferrell is not only pushing himself, but also his 17-year-old son Blake, who is severely disabled. Through his efforts – and support from family and friends – Ferrell is able to give Blake the gift of movement and activity, a gift that for Ferrell and his family is returned by knowing Blake enjoys the experience.

Blake began having seizures when he was just 10 months old. Seeking to help their son in any way they could, Ferrell and his wife Colleen immediately began bringing Blake to different doctors and hospitals for testing and treatment. However, by the time Blake was 3, he was still unable to walk and his parents were still seeking answers.

While Blake’s diagnosis remained a mystery, one answer to his treatment was physical activity.

“I remember one physical therapist stressing the importance of movement and getting Blake involved in activities,” Ferrell said. Heeding this advice, the Ferrells began an intensive regimen of therapeutic exercise with Blake three times a day.

All of the activity paid off when Blake took his first few steps at age 5. Enrolling their son in activities like SPUR horseback riding, YMCA swimming and Challenged Youth Sports, a recreational sports program for children with disabilities, the Ferrells continued to see improvement in Blake's mobile and cognitive abilities.

The progress was short-lived though, when at age 9, Blake began having more seizures than ever, up to 150 per month. While new medication reduced his seizures to only 15 episodes per month, Blake was once again unable to walk due to their impact.

After seeing how much Blake loved and benefited from physical activity, Ferrell was determined to find a way to keep his son active and involved in sports, despite his immobility. The answer came to him one day in early November 2009, after watching father-and-son duo, Dick and Rick Hoyt, complete an Ironman Triathlon. Dick pulls Rick in a boat when he swims, rides with his son in a specialized carrier when he bikes and pushes him in a chair as he runs. Watching this incredible team finish a race, Ferrell thought that he too would complete a triathlon that summer and would bring Blake along for the ride. Once Ferrell got this idea in his head, there was no stopping him.

"I'm a big-idea guy. I come up with a big idea like this, but my wife and friend, Mark Cartier, are the brains behind the actual planning," Ferrell said.

Enlisting the help of Colleen and their younger son, Luke, 9, and a few friends, Ferrell began an eight-month journey that would turn his big idea into a reality.

"I thought, how hard could it be?" said Ferrell, who had been an athlete in college and high school.

However, after the first few weeks Ferrell quickly learned the physical challenges of training. Undeterred, he upped his efforts, training six days a week. He began pushing Blake's chair filled with a 50-pound bag of sand and swimming with a small boat, all while staying motivated by Blake. "I wanted to give him this incredible experience of completing a triathlon. It's something that most able-bodied people do not get to experience."

In addition to the physical training, preparing for the triathlon became a family affair. Friends and family assembled a team to monitor Blake during races to ensure his safety.

One of the key members of the team was Luke, who began to run and ride alongside his father and brother during the races. "I love that my whole family and friends get involved," Ferrell said.

The Ferrells decided to officially name their team, Team LB for Team Luke and Blake.

After successfully completing their first triathlon in 2009, the team has completed more than 12 triathlons and numerous 5k-road races, an impressive resume for any athlete, let alone this incredible team. Now that Team LB has posted some competitive times, Ferrell has only one concern moving forward, "I just hope that Blake doesn't start looking for someone faster," he joked.

Lucky for the team, Luke has plans to continue racing with Blake when it comes time for his father to pass the torch.

“I’ll do it for Blake. I’d do anything for Blake,” Luke said.

Not only does Team LB foster a special bond between father and sons, but it also evokes an incredible outpouring of support from the community.

“It is amazing to see the responses of the other athletes in these races,” Ferrell said. “When we show up, there are always other triathletes recognizing Blake and wishing him luck. They often cheer us on during the races. It’s very heartening to have this kind of support.”

Many local companies have also been helpful in Team LB’s efforts. For example, one local cycling company customizes racing wheels for Blake’s chair. Ferrell’s company, Morgan Stanley, has sponsored several of their triathlons. “When my manager found out about these races, she was eager to get involved, and encouraged me to let others know what I was doing.”

Although he was initially hesitant to publicize the races, Ferrell has successfully used them as a platform to connect with other challenged athletes and organizations.

Recently, Team LB was honored with carrying the torch in the 31st annual Law Enforcement Torch Run, held each year at the opening of the Special Olympics summer games. They are also involved with the Challenged Athletes Foundation (CAF), an organization that helps challenged athletes compete in races. CAF reserves spots for athletes in large races, like the New York Marathon, a race that Ferrell hopes to one day run with Blake.

Through his efforts, Ferrell hopes to inspire other athletes to help give more kids like Blake this incredible opportunity.

“I would definitely like to see more challenged athletes given the ability to race,” Ferrell said. “I think rather than setting up separate races for challenged athletes, it’s better to involve them in regular races just like other athletes.”

With the goal of giving his son and other disabled kids the ability to compete in regular races, Ferrell hopes to one day complete an Ironman Triathlon with Blake. Although the term “regular” hardly applies to this grueling triathlon, which involves a 2.4-mile swim, a 112-mile bike ride and a full 26.2-mile marathon run to the finish. However, with Ferrell’s determination, Team LB may one day be crossing that Ironman finish line, inspiring others the same way that Ferrell was inspired by the Hoyts.

“I believe if there is a big enough why, the how part will always come easily,” he said.