



Family keeps son's spirit alive by helping other children participate in triathlons

By Rich Norman



KEEP ON RACING FOR CHASE

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When Chase Kowalski ran in one of his first organized races, he was just two-and-a-half years old and needed a helping hand to reach the finish line.

That day, the precocious preschooler ran a 50-yard dash and a 100-yard dash without hesitation or fear. Finally, when he begged his mom to let him enter the 400-yard event, which required running an entire lap around a track, it proved to be a bit too much for Chase. The little boy, his mom said, was rarely slowed down by anything.

"He ran his little heart out," Rebecca Kowalski remembered about his 400-yard debut. Chase's legs ran out of steam and he had resorted to walking when a 5-year-old friend ran back, grabbed Chase's left hand and shepherded the blonde-haired boy with the Velcro-fastened running shoes to the finish line.

Chase Kowalski was just getting started in life and sports when he was one of 20 students and six teachers tragically lost in a senseless shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in December 2012. The second-deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history had taken place less than five months after Chase completed — and won — his first triathlon.

"It totally blew my mind that kids would want to do [triathlons]," Rebecca said of her reaction when her son, the youngest of three children, expressed interest in the sport. "To me, a triathlon is total body torture. I'm not a runner and my husband has never been a runner."

Regardless of their lack of experience in the sport, the Kowalskis woke before dawn one August morning and drove their son 73 miles to the Kids Who Tri Succeed Triathlon in Mansfield, Conn. Rebecca had located the race only after Chase handed her an iPad and urged her to "Google it" for him.

"He fell asleep in the back of the car," she said of the early morning drive. "He had his little blanket with him."

While Chase was still a little boy with a special blanket, he also knew what it meant to be a competitor. For his first triathlon, that was easy to figure out. When he got his arm marked with his race number (92), Chase's mom could see the joy on her son's face.

"He just glistened and thought it was so cool!" she said.

The Kowalskis are now turning that one-time triathlon experience into an opportunity to honor their son's legacy and help other children experience the joy of competing. Rebecca and her husband, Stephen, created the Race4Chase Kids Triathlon Program, partnering with several Connecticut YMCAs to start the program locally with plans to grow it throughout the U.S. The introductory program will give kids who never thought about competing in a triathlon a chance to race.

"Ultimately, when you give these kids an opportunity to feel good about themselves, to feel a sense of accomplishment and to be able to conquer things and to give them the self-esteem that they need, it can change their lives," she said.

Not surprisingly for a 6-year-old, Chase's start in triathlon needed a little direction. After initially starting the swim portion of the race by walking through waist-deep lake water, he eventually dived in after his mom reminded him to swim. He finished the 20-yard swim and then mounted his bike with his water shoes still on, narrowly avoiding a collision with another competitor in the transition area.

"He almost got taken out by a kid with training wheels," Rebecca said.

Out of 20 4-6-year-olds that day, Chase had the fifth-fastest swim time, an impressive feat considering he had taught himself to swim in the backyard pool earlier that summer after watching Ryan Lochte and Michael Phelps in the London Olympics. Pedaling a red Lightning McQueen bike, Chase's 1/2-mile bike time was the fastest of all kids in his age group. He finished the race with the second-fastest run over 1/3 of a mile to record an 18-second win. "We had no expectations for him," Rebecca said. "We just wanted him to go and have fun."

Like many, Chase's mom initially thought the sport of triathlon was only open to older children and adults. Her son's race opened her eyes to the possibility of helping others.

And now, almost five years after he was the recipient of a helping hand from another child as he struggled to reach the finish line, Chase is the one reaching back to help other kids as they make their way toward their own finish lines.

It's an image that makes a mom proud.

"That gives me chills," Rebecca said. "I don't want people to associate his name with how he was taken," she said. "I want them to associate it with how he helped change the world and how he helped children and was an inspiration."



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