

Health



PHOTO BY AMANDA BROWN

Matt Denson, a teacher at Tenafly Middle School, (left) runs with students during an after-school exercise program.

Able-bodied buddies

School students help prepare disabled for races

By Sandra H. Shichtman

Every afternoon during the school year, a dozen or more students meet at the running track behind Tenafly Middle School. With their coach, teacher Matt Denson, they do some stretching exercises. Then, they run or walk around the track for the next 15 to 20 minutes. They are members of the Achilles Track Club.

The Achilles Track Club is a worldwide organization that encourages people with disabilities to run in races along with non-disabled people. It has 43 chapters in the United States and more than 110 chapters in other countries. But the chapter at Tenafly Middle School is unique in two ways. Only one member — Denson, who is legally blind — has a disability. And, it is the only chapter where kids are training to run with and assist disabled runners.

Denson discovered the pleasure of running when he was a teenager. At age 12, he was diagnosed with a large tumor at the base of his brain involving his optic nerve. With the removal of the tumor, he lost most of his eyesight. For the next four years, he underwent almost 40 operations. "I was in the hospital more than I was out of it," he recalls.

Two important things came out of his hospital experience. His exposure to people with severe illnesses made him appreciate the things he had. And he discovered the joy of running.

Prior to his illness, Denson had been very athletic. Once out of the hospital, his life was radically different.

"I had to be very sedentary because of my illness, and I was on radiation therapy and lots of medication. I was very lethargic," he says. "One day I was lying on the couch and feeling crummy."

That's when he decided to go for a walk around the block.

Feeling good after that initial walk, Denson extended his walks to two blocks, then three, then a mile. Soon, he was running on the town's running track. By the time he got to college, he was running races. As a student at Montclair State College, as it was named before gaining university status, he ran in a race sponsored by the United States Association of Blind Athletes. He graduated to running marathons. In 1988, he ran in the New Jersey Waterfront Marathon, and he has run in the New York City Marathon six times.

Last year, Denson started a chapter of the Achilles Track Club in Tenafly Middle School, where he is a special education teacher. In all, his club has 25 to 35 student members, although all do not show up for practice every day.

"Matt's a terrific role model for kids," says Bob Weldon, the school principal. "What he's been through and has been able to overcome is just an exceptional story for kids. Most students in this building would not realize that Matt has a disability until he talks about it and tells them exactly what it is. And then he describes how he's overcome it."

Denson's club has two major goals. One is to get normally sedentary suburban kids to enjoy exercising. "It's a very non-competitive running atmosphere," he says. "I wanted to get them exposed to how good they feel after getting out there and doing some exercise for 15 or 20 minutes."

The second goal of the club has a community-service aspect. Members are volunteers-in-training, learning to run alongside and assist disabled Achilles athletes in races and, eventually, in marathons.

"I don't know whether it's just in suburbia, but the kids are very isolated and they really don't have exposure to people who are 'different,'" Denson says. "I think it's good to expose them to people like that at an early age. And a lot of these kids are just wowed at the fact that some Achilles members are orthopedically impaired or blind, have MS [multiple sclerosis] or CP [cerebral palsy], or are amputees, and they get out there and they do what most able-bodied people would never think about doing, and that's marathoning. That's what really wows these kids and gets them really interested."

Each week, Denson sets a different goal for his runners to achieve in their practice sessions. He does this to make the sessions more interesting. The goal might be to run or walk around the track for 20 minutes or to do 10 laps. Or to keep moving for half an hour without stopping. Though they are not timed and the atmosphere is non-competitive, many runners finish their practice sessions red-faced and panting, with sweat glistening on their faces.

Initially, several student members found that running even once around the track left them gasping. With Denson as their role model—he runs with them—and his encouragement, they not only made it all the way around, but they pushed themselves to do more. They also began to understand how hard disabled runners must work to train for a race or a marathon.

"Once a month, Mr. Denson takes us to New York City and we help the [Achilles athletes] stretch," says Mi Kyoung Kim, 12, a member of the club. "We just run or walk with them, but usually adults [adult volunteers] help them run or walk because they're stronger than we are."

"I noticed they were very fast," adds Juanita Hong, 11, another member. "They were faster than us."

Ji Young Kim, 12, was also impressed with the runners' speed. "It kind of surprised me," she says.

Joo Young Kim, 11, remembered a recent trip to New York. "When we went there, we met a man in a wheelchair," she says. "He was really friendly and he told us all about Achilles Track Club. It was a really good experience."

Joe Vega, 13, who can run a mile in eight minutes, likes the club. "It's fun," he says. "You get to go places, and you see if you can run. And it's fun because you get to help people, too."

Joe said he'd planned to cheer his coach on in the recent New York City Marathon. "I think he could have won," Joe said. But Denson was forced to out of this year's race because of a knee injury.

Gary Khacherian, 13, is a hockey player who calls himself a "sometimes serious" runner. He joined the club this year to get the benefits of regular exercise.

Denson calls Ryan Moran, who is almost 14, his veteran. Ryan has been a member of the club since the middle of last school year.

"I go to New York for most of the races," says Ryan, who runs 5-kilometer races in about 34 minutes. "It's fun to run." About becoming an Achilles volunteer, he says, "I just think it would be nice to help out."

Like the other volunteers-in-training, Ryan is impressed by the courage and stamina of the Achilles runners. And, like the others, running is fun for him. It appears as though Denson has achieved the goals he envisioned for the middle school chapter of the Achilles Track Club.