

Youth running program targets child obesity, with new shoes as a reward

Shawn Doherty – 7/31/2009

Larry Brown is 12 years old and fast -- so fast that he won Allied Drive's first one-mile race this week, running in his socks. The crowd in Marlborough Park was cheering when he finished in 6 minutes, 30 seconds. And it kept on cheering as 43 other neighborhood children crossed the finish line behind him.

Sergio Hernandez, a tall, graceful 13-year-old athlete who plans to run cross country for Spring Harbor Middle School, loped into second place with a time of 7:11. Gregory Wright, a fit 11-year-old, sprinted across the finish line just four seconds later. Some of the runners wore sandals or moccasins and baggy pants they had to hold up while they ran. But they all eventually finished, gasping, sweating, clutching their sides and grinning with pride.



Last but not least was Dontay Pom, 12, who hopes running will help him lose weight. Dontay stamped his right hand with a tortoise tattoo and his left with a hare. He was the tortoise, clocking in at 19:08. But he was happy. For the first time ever this summer, he had jogged the whole mile instead of walking it or giving up.

"It's not about who came in first or who came in last. It's about finishing the race," says the children's proud trainer, Molly Kloosterboer, a University of Wisconsin Medical School student who started the Miler in Training program at Allied Drive this summer with the help of the Madison Schools and Community Recreation (MSCR) summer program, the medical school and Fleet Feet Sports, a locally owned store on Old Sauk Road.



For the 13 young runners in the Miler in Training program, the race was the culmination of six weeks of hard physical workouts, and lessons on nutrition and hygiene. For the rest of the kids, participants in MSCR's summer program, it was a chance to try something new; more than 30 children in the program responded to Kloosterboer's open invitation to compete.

The Allied Drive Miler project is a "great creative example" of how even small local projects can tackle the state's troubling obesity problem, says Stephanie Marquis, a spokeswoman for the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. Just two weeks ago, the department released its latest alarming report on obesity rates in the state, which are double what they were in 1990. The report found that today at least half the adults in every county in Wisconsin are either overweight or obese. Our children are too heavy, too. Around one out of four high school students is now overweight or obese. Obesity rates among minorities are often even higher than among whites.



A lack of exercise -- and access to it -- is one reason for the soaring rates and racial disparities, and local kids know it. Nearly half of black youth, compared with 22 percent of white kids surveyed in a report released last summer by the Department of Public Health for Madison and Dane County, complained that their neighborhood had too few organized team sports. Forty percent of minority youth also complained of inadequate outdoor facilities in the area where they live.

But you don't need a lot of fancy equipment or facilities to run, Kloosterboer says. Jogging is something almost anybody can do almost anywhere. "All you need is a good pair of running shoes," she says.

Few kids in her club had such a pair. When Molly measured their feet, she discovered most kids were trying to work out in sandals or sneakers that were two sizes too small. Fleet Feet Sports donated top-of-the-line running shoes to each child in the club. Each child also got a pair of sleek nylon running shorts, a T-shirt and socks.

The kids are thrilled with their new shoes, which they keep clean and packaged in their original red boxes when they aren't using them. "These shoes are so comfortable and bouncy!" Dontay says, demonstrating the spring in his step for envious friends.

But there was a catch: To keep the shoes, Dontay and the other Miler kids had to finish the race.

Not long ago, that would have seemed impossible for some of them. When she started training the team six weeks ago, Kloosterboer says, she couldn't even get the children to jog once around the park. "They'd start grumbling and quit halfway," she says. "I had to trick them into running by playing Sharks and Minnows. And then I just made the playing field bigger and bigger until they were running around the park."

The kids became more enthusiastic and fit each Tuesday afternoon, when the group worked out. A boy named DA even started running the mile between his home and the summer program to get in extra training. Sergio now runs up to three miles a day, he says.

Before the race, they saunter around like pros, warming up with expert jumping jacks and stretches, and chomping apples instead of candy and potato chips for instant energy.



Well, some of them act like pros. "No pantsing!" bellows one counselor as the boys start tugging on the waistbands of each other's pants. The rowdy racers then flex their biceps for the cameras.

The girls show off less but are equally nervous and excited. "I've never been in a race this big!" confides awestruck racer number 2973, who is 9 years old. Her friend, entry number 2961 and also a 9-year-old novice, has her winning strategy all figured out, undeterred by her plastic flip-flops. "I will start off walking, then jogging, and then race to the end!" she announces.

Adult volunteers and day program counselors pin entry numbers onto every athlete. Some of the MSCR counselors, including Oliver Kiefer, will run with the kids to keep them on course. Finally, after the apples and warm-ups and scoldings and pep talks, it's time to start the long-anticipated race.



A giant blow-up arch and digital time clock mark the start and finish line.

Everyone, not just the giggling girls who shriek when he passes, figured Sergio would cross that line first -- especially after his main competition, DA, was sent home earlier in the day for a disciplinary problem. "Sergio, will you carry me on your back?" a teammate begs.

"Everybody ready?" an announcer asks, speaking through a mic. The kids quiet down. Sergio and the other more experienced runners who had trained with Kloosterboer crouch down to start. A couple of girls fix their hair.

"Get ready, get set -- GO!"

Seconds after the herd takes off, a boy in a blue T-shirt falls. "Uh-oh, we already have someone down!" a counselor shouts. Dontay stops, helps the boy up, and takes off again at a slow but steady pace.



Suddenly, all the racers are gone. It is eerily still. Spectators, including fans holding homemade signs to cheer their friends on, walk across the grassy field to the paved trail that loops around the tree-studded park to wait for the racers to circle on back. In a couple of minutes, a lone runner can be seen sprinting around a corner, way ahead of the pack. But it isn't Sergio. The crowd cranes its collective neck and gapes as a slight boy in a black T-shirt with a determined look on his face speeds past for the second and last loop around the park.

Larry keeps that lead for the rest of the race. "Awesome," says Kiefer, hustling to keep up. "I tried to pull past him at the end, but he had more in the tank than I did and just put on more speed. Once he grows a few inches, he'll be a medal winner."

Every kid felt like a medal winner after the race. "My stomach hurts a little," says Marcella, a petite girl who beat her brother with a 9-minute mile -- her first race ever -- in moccasins and sparkly pink clothes. "But I'm proud of myself."

What was her favorite part of the event?

"The cheers," she says, shyly.

"It's not too often that these kids do something that has a crowd cheering for them," says Matt Groose, a veteran runner and event volunteer.

Unless Allied Drive hosts another race next year. "Now all the kids are asking: Can we do running club next time? Can we do it too?" says Leslie Thompson, youth program director for the MSCR program at the Allied Drive Learning Center. "We're hoping this becomes an annual event."

