

Shawn Siemers sought out a special racing chair for his stepdaughter Anna so that they could enjoy road-racing together



Racing for Anna

Shawn Siemers and his stepdaughter Anna, who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, found a way to race together, inspiring others along the way

Written by Marysabel Cardozo | Select photography by Myra Nwoke

At Morton Ranch High School, Shawn Siemers coaches cross country and boys track. Every Thursday night, you'll still find him on a track, training for road-racing with his stepdaughter Anna, now 14, who has cerebral palsy. "When we run, we are a team," says Shawn. "I'm the legs and she's the heart."

A brain injury at birth caused the disorder, which means Anna has limited motor skills, requiring a wheelchair. She is, however, cognitively aware and can respond to yes and no questions. Despite the condition, her mother, Paige Siemers, a teacher at Beckendorff Junior High, has always found inclusive activities for her. Anna has also developed close relationships with Coach Siemers' runners, attending meets and cheering them on.

One day, Shawn showed Anna a video of Dick and Rick Hoyt, the father-and-son team who ran the Boston Marathon. The dad pushes Rick in a special racing chair. When Shawn and Paige asked Anna if she wanted a chair made so she could race, Anna responded with three long blinks. "In other words, she was saying, 'Yes! Yes! Yes!'" explains Shawn.

Custom Running Chair

Shortly after, Shawn and his wife got to work making it happen. They discovered Ainsley's Angels, an organization aiming to ensure anyone can experience endurance events by matching disabled athlete riders with runners who push them in racing chairs. Ainsley's Angels connected them with the Hoyt Team who built a custom chair for Anna.

The family felt the support of their loved ones and running community when, within 72 hours, more than the needed amount to get Anna's chair made had been donated. "We wrote every donor's name on the wheels of Anna's chair, so they are with her every time she runs," says Shawn.

The Final Mile

In the beginning, Anna had to adapt to the Hoyt running chair, which excludes the support her wheelchair provides. She had to train her body to relax, a big challenge for someone with her condition. But with consistent hard work, Shawn and Anna have run many

races, including three half marathons and last year's Houston Marathon - a huge challenge and goal for the family.

Much had to be coordinated in terms of feeding and positioning Anna, who was struggling with a respiratory illness at the time. At mile 25, Shawn stopped running to have a talk with Anna. "I helped her straighten up in the chair, and I told her, 'You are a marathoner! We have one mile left, and it's going to be a party!'" he says.

Shawn recalls Anna's reaction about achieving her goal. "Her smile and the way her eyes lit up was the most incredible, beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life. She laughed and cheered the entire mile, and I cried."

Born to Inspire

Shawn believes road-racing provides an opportunity for people with special needs to not only experience running but to also feel included and not disabled. "Road-racing moves people like Anna from the sidelines to being a participant in the race with everyone else," he adds. They plan to continue their celebratory journey and already have 15 races and events scheduled for 2017.

Anna is not only a participant anymore but an ambassador too, which has given her more confidence. It has also given others encouragement. After finishing the Houston Half, Shawn says several participants told them how their presence helped them finish. "I told my wife, 'You know why Anna was born? To inspire others.'" **KM**

MARYSABEL CARDOZO, journalist and University of Texas at Austin alum, loves working with special needs kids and writing about stories like this one.



Shawn feels that while he is the legs of their team, Anna is the heart

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