

Kids' Triathlon Strengthens Brothers' Bond

For a kid like Cayden, with cerebral palsy, a lot of activities are unthinkable. But for a kid like Conner, the only thing that's unthinkable is leaving his brother behind.



Conner Green pulls his brother Cayden Long in a raft while participating in the swimming portion of the 2011 Nashville Kids Triathlon. Cayden has cerebral palsy and would be unable to participate without the help of his brother. / Alan Poizner / For The Tennessean

Applause swells through the aquatic center as Conner Green swims. Splashing with determination, he reaches mid-lap in his very first triathlon as the crowd of spectators urges him forward.

The 7-year-old stares ahead, peering through the lenses of his blue-rimmed goggles, and kicks hard. One hand grabs at the water in front of him. The other hand tugs the raft behind him, where his 5-year-old brother, Cayden Long, enjoys the ride.

Cayden has cerebral palsy. He can't walk. He can't speak. But with his brother's help, he can swim, bike and run.

At the June 5 Nashville Kids Triathlon, the duo did all three. With Conner pushing and pulling Cayden through the course, the boys did something together they have never been able to do before. The physical demands on Conner were intense, but the physical limitations of his brother propelled him.

“There’s a saying,” Conner says. “ ‘Never say never.’ ”

Grief and grit

Cayden was 4 months old when he was diagnosed with hypertonic cerebral palsy. Muscle spasms would seize his tiny body, leaving him with little control.

The reality shook young parents Jenny and Jeff Long of White House. Then it inspired them.

“You almost grieve your child in a way,” says Jenny Long, a stay-at-home mother to three sons. “You grieve the loss of a child with a normal ability to do things. But after the grieving process you get this ‘umph.’ You say, ‘My child is not going to live a life inside.’ He can get out. He can do things. It just takes willpower.”

Cayden goes to school like other 5-year-olds. He gets up early and rides the bus to Beech Elementary. He has a wheelchair, which he navigates, and he knows sign language.

Cayden goes out to dinner with his family and plays with his brother. Conner, a student at H.B Williams Elementary, loves tickling his brother and making him laugh.

“He’s really cool,” Conner says. “He’s funny, and he’s really nice. He never gets mad.”

Cayden loves the water. He plays in his grandfather’s pool, where his muscles can relax and he can feel free. But other stuff, like racing down the street or biking through the neighborhood, has been impossible.

Or, at least, it used to be.

As Conner nears the pool’s edge, the final of four swim laps nearly complete, Cayden looks intently upward from his position in the raft, watching the race flags pass above him.

Then the crowd catches his attention. Hearing the applause, he raises both hands above his head and swings his arms open and shut as if imitating an alligator chomp, clapping with the crowd.

One leg down. Two more to go.

'Such passion'

Wet footprints leave a trail across the pool deck as Conner’s bare feet run out the aquatic center door to find his bike. Alongside, Mandy Gildersleeve carries Cayden.

Gildersleeve is a youth triathlon coach and event manager for the Nashville Kids Triathlon. She and her husband organize youth triathlons across the country. They have had special needs participants before

— young amputees or children with diabetes. Normally, a mom or dad will complete the race with their child. But, of the more than 2,400 participants in their events, never before has one young sibling assisted another in the way that Conner is helping Cayden.

“To have a (7-year-old) boy have such passion — that’s amazing,” Gildersleeve says. “So many people don’t have that.”

While Conner ties the electric-blue laces of his new running shoes — a special Foot Locker purchase so he could be perfectly outfitted for the event — Gildersleeve places Cayden in a wheeled trailer designed for him to ride in while being pulled behind a bike.

Cayden has a helmet on his head and a smile on his face. Conner concentrates.

Before race day, Conner practiced pedaling with Cayden’s trailer attached to his youth-sized bike, but on the morning of the triathlon one of the trailer tires burst, leaving one side with a flat. The bad tire, coupled with a few challenging hills, prompted a small change in plans. So as the trio takes to the road, Gildersleeve pulls Cayden.

They circle Centennial Park. Midway through the 3-mile loop, they stop. Gildersleeve unhooks the trailer from her own bike and attaches it to Conner’s.

“He kept saying, ‘I want to ride with my brother,’ ” Gildersleeve says. “He was so excited.”

A big step

Conner always wanted to ride bikes with his little brother but couldn’t.

“That crushes you as a parent,” says Jenny Long, 27.

Sitting on the couch one day, with mom flipping through a *Sumner Parent* magazine, Conner spotted a way to change that. He saw an advertisement for the kids’ triathlon and said he and Cayden should do it — together.

“At first I was kind of taken back, like ‘What did you say?’ ” Jenny Long recalls. “You don’t want to say your child can’t do something.”

So the Longs explored the possibility with race organizers and worked out the details.

On race morning, Jenny and Jeff Long stood next to Centennial Sports-plex wearing fluorescent yellow T-shirts that said “Team Long Brothers” and waited for the event to begin. Conner, who is on a hip-hop dance team, passed the time displaying moves from the previous night’s recital. Cayden whipped around in his wheelchair, stopping only for sips of blue Powerade.

During the pre-race prayer, Conner closed his eyes and bowed his head, leaning gently against Cayden’s wheelchair. Jeff and Jenny were not nearly as relaxed.

“I was nervous and scared and really excited at the same time,” says Jeff Long, a 29-year-old electrician.

Those nerves resurface as the couple waits for their boys to come back into view during the bike ride. Jenny Long had never left Cayden in someone else's hands before. Now he is zooming around behind a bike. Staring down an empty road, Jenny bites her nails.

Tenderly, Jeff places his arm around her waist and offers a reassuring kiss. Minutes later, Conner rounds the corner. Cayden is asleep in the trailer. Jenny Long relaxes.

"I was just astonished," she says. "I was overcome with all sorts of emotion."

Two legs down. One to go.

The homestretch

Conner drops off his bike in the transition area, and, after a sip of water, re-emerges. This time he isn't pulling the trailer, but pushing it as he runs with Cayden. There is just half a mile between them and the finish line. As Conner's feet pound the pavement, the morning sun sneaks through the trees.

Even at 7, he is struck by the moment's significance: "Me and him don't get to do a lot of stuff together. It felt really connecting."

Crossing the finish line feels even better. Medals dangling against their chests, cold towels around their necks, smiles on their faces, Cayden and Conner are hoisted into the air like heroes.

"If I put a lot of effort into it and say I can, then I can," Conner says.

And Cayden can, too.



Written by

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Cayden Long rides in a bicycle trailer as Conner Green pedals during the Nashville Kids Triathlon. Conner had always wanted the chance to ride bikes with his younger brother. / Alan Poizner / For The Tennessean



Conner Green and his brother Cayden Long cross the finish line. / Alan Poizner / For The Tennessean



David Russell, one of the many supporters who came to cheer on Conner Green and Cayden Long, hoists Conner after the race. / Alan Poizner / For The Tennessean



Cayden Long gets a hero's reception, too, after the race. / Alan Poizner / For The Tennessean

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