

Aaron Scheidies Becomes Fastest Physically Impaired Athlete

Dallas, TX
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In August I received an email boasting the subject, “Love Mail” from a name I didn’t recognize, asking if I could “guide him through a triathlon”. It was Aaron Scheidies, and a quick search told me he was the fastest visually impaired athlete in the world. Aaron was looking for more than a guide; he wanted me to help him with something epic: He wanted to not just to break the Physically Challenged World Record for Olympic Distance Triathlon, but to smash it. His goal was to break the two hour barrier, and to do it he needed someone to be his eyes without holding him back from his potential.



Aaron asked me because I am from the Northwest, and he saw my name on the results from USAT Nationals. We’re both currently attending the University of Washington, and it was because of this geographic coincidence that I was given the opportunity to accompany Aaron on his mission.

Needless to say, I jumped at the opportunity. We decided on the Toyota US Open in Dallas as the venue, and just two days later Life Time Fitness had helped us arrange the entire experience.

Aaron Scheidies suffers from macular degeneration, which has caused his vision to slowly deteriorate since around the third grade. Aaron’s childhood dream of becoming the next David Beckham was his toughest loss, but that may be the only thing he let go with his vision. It’s hard to describe Aaron’s character and natural talent, but here are two experiences from Dallas that are indicative of how he takes on the world:

- 1) Within hours of arriving in Dallas Aaron walked into a room full of executive from Life Time Fitness and Tritan Sports Marketing, got tickets to the Dallas Stars game and was taken to the Cowboy’s Stadium where he kicked a 30 yard field goal and made it.
- 2) During lunch at the Hilton’s sports bar I asked a pro, Jillian Petersen, if she wanted to play a game of pool. Aaron offered to partner with somebody, and Jillian drew the short straw. After dominating the game Aaron tapped in the 8 ball 20 minutes later.

Yes, I was beaten at Pool by a blind kid, but that’s not the point. Not anyone can kick in a 30 yard field goal. Not everyone can walk into a room filled with unknown corporate executives and walk out with a handful of new friends, and the average person wouldn’t spend the time to master a game that relies on their weakness. Aaron is athletically gifted, but also has an exception personality. I could list a lot more qualities, and tell you a dozen things Aaron can do despite his disability, but there is no “despite”. Disabled or not, Aaron Scheidies is good at *life*.

Race day finally arrived, and Aaron and I entered the water with a heartfelt introduction that showed the announcer had obviously been touched by Aaron’s personality and determination. We started the race with the elite amateur wave, just minutes behind some of the world’s top professional athletes. We stayed in the middle of the pack for the swim, which meant I had the responsibility of keeping other athletes away from the 2 meter long tether between us. By the end of the race when the field started funneling toward the finish shoot my “mama bear” instincts kicked in and I started frantically fending off anyone that came close to my bear cub. Somehow between yelling at other competitors to stay away and cheering for Aaron to stay strong I managed to keep up, and after a rough swim we exited together in just 21 minutes, two minutes slower than the goal, but still determined.

We hopped onto the Aero-framed Griffin Tandem and started hammering right away onto the 40km bike course. We knew that reaching Aaron's goal was going to depend on an epic bike split, and I was determined to pull my weight. The rolling 40km course started with a gradual uphill and the feedback from my Garmin Forerunner was too negative to relay to Aaron. We needed to push speeds near 30mph to give us a shot at the two hour mark, but for the first ten minutes we crawled along at 21 to 22 mph. My coxswain talents were fading as I gasped for air, and Aaron was already so focused on his effort that my silence didn't seem to matter. It may have been the only time during the race that my vocal cords were allowed to rest, but as we passed the highest elevation near the 10km mark the course began to descend toward downtown Dallas. With gravity on our side things started looking up. As we bobbed along through the rolling hills I looked down to see my Garmin displaying speeds sometimes over 40mph, and as we barreled along I relayed information to Aaron as cyclists appeared on the horizon. I was counting seconds between us and the other competitors and then yelling "left" to warn them as we tore by.

We came into the second transition, 25 miles from the swim start at Reunion Arena. Riding full speed into downtown Dallas we dismounted and scrambled through transition. It was the first time I had seen my partner in over 50 minutes and he appeared nervous as we threw on shoes and a tether and darted out onto the course. My watch said 1:17, which I relayed to Aaron whose look of terror faded momentarily beneath a smile.

Deafening cheers from the spectators filled downtown Dallas as Aaron rounded off his first 5km lap with 21 minutes remaining in our second hour. As quickly as the cheering started it ended as we headed into an underground portion of the course. Aaron began to fade, and I attempted to make up for the quiet surroundings by chanting everything that crossed my mind. Within the fourth mile the Amateur Elite wave we had started with began to catch us, but the competitors greeted us with smiles and words of encouragement that seemed to make Aaron lighter on his feet. After the final aid station Aaron spoke for the first time in over an hour, "make-sure...I-don't-want...to...fall...over". We were on the final stretch, and Aaron's tank was empty. I started jumping along next to Aaron and clapping and doing everything I could to keep him focused and striding forward. Aaron's face showed determination, but I could tell that every stride was filled with pain and uncertainty. I fell a few strides behind as Aaron entered the finish shoot and the crowd went absolutely crazy. "Ladies and Gentlemen, Here's Aaron Scheidies finishing in... One-hour-58-O-EIGHT!! IT'S-A-NEW-WORLD-RECORD!!!" The roar from the crowd grew even louder, threatening to burst our eardrums.

Aaron gave everything he had to the course, and the cameras, the crowd, and the slow recognition that he had finally accomplished his dream of a sub two hour triathlon were barely enough to keep him on his feet. It was an hour later that I heard familiar laughter and knew Aaron finally realized his own accomplishment.

In Dallas I saw a *gifted* person overcome fear, pain, and doubt. I saw Aaron push well beyond the breaking point to discover his potential. Aaron says visual deficit is a part of him; not something that holds him back. By chasing his dreams one-at-a-time he has become the World Record Holder, and the fastest disabled athlete *ever*. Aaron inspires us to believe what many have forgotten: If you can dream it, you can make it happen.

For more on Ben Collins including results, schedules, and personal blog, go to <http://bencollins.org>