

Eagles Autism Challenge 5K run won by Delaware man who has beaten own autism challenges



[Kevin Tresolini](#)

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The Eagles Autism Challenge 5K is similar to most fund-raising running events, attracting participants seeking to test their fitness in a competitive environment while helping to aid an important cause.

One of the participants in the May 18 race, a 32-year-old Delawarean who has actually has autism, was particularly pleased to have raised more than \$5,000.

“Helping,” he said of what inspired him to do that.

That Sean Coleman, who lives in a development called The Woods near Christiana, happened to also place first overall in that 3.1-mile run that finished at Lincoln Financial Field was a delightful bonus.



“Before the race, I thought I could do it,” Coleman said. “ ‘ [People said] Proud of you and congratulations.’ ”

Coleman galloped to first place among 2,585 overall finishers in the 5K run in 18 minutes, 1.92 seconds. It was later determined the course after a slight alteration was actually a bit longer than the 5K/3.1-mile distance. He won by almost 23 seconds.

[EAGLES AUTISM CHALLENGE: 5K results](#)

[The Eagles Autism Challenge](#), held annually since 2018, raised \$8.1 million for autism research and care programs this year, the Eagles said. In addition to the 5K run, the event included a sensory walk in which participants follow a course using touch and several cycling excursions involving more than 5,600 participants.



The National Football League's Philadelphia Eagles, who operate the event, weren't aware their 5K winner had such a background until Sean's brother, Patrick, who lives in California, shared that news with them in an email after the event in Philadelphia. Patrick wanted all to know, he wrote, "that there is always hope, exemplified by my younger brother's showing today at the race and perseverance throughout the years to stop the stigma that people with autism are lesser than."

Running fast while inspiring others

Jim Fischer has operated the weekly Tuesday Night Running Club for 40 years, with the long-time former University of Delaware track and cross-country coach providing free training advice for members of the local running community, first on the UD track and now at Saint Mark's High.

Fischer has coached hundreds of Delaware runners of all ages and skill levels over more than 40 years. He has found a unique student in Coleman.

More than 40 runners gathered at Saint Mark's Tuesday night, some running faster than others but all drawing valuable benefits from the camaraderie and the challenge. Before they began their workouts, Fischer gathered the group together and described how one of those present, Coleman, had just won the Eagles Autism 5K.

"That's a big deal," Fischer, [the Delaware Sports Hall of Famer who later coached Ursuline Academy teams](#), told the gathering, which then broke into a fervent applause.



“We’re trying to work on his form a little bit, but he’s just tough,” Fischer said, adding that to win a 5K in such a fast time with 2,500-plus runners is “incredible” for any runner.

Others gathered on the Saint Mark's track have certainly been inspired by Coleman’s success.

“I’ve seen Sean from the beginning,” Dave Wiechecki said. “When he first got here he really didn’t seem like he knew what he was doing. Just the growth and the speed he’s picked up is amazing.”

“To see his determination,” Bill Rose said. “When he first got here he wasn’t very fast in comparison to other people. He didn’t let it bother him. He just gradually ramped up and kept coming back and now he’s whizzing past us.”

Coleman also joins fellow [Pike Creek Valley Running Club](#) members for Thursday runs at Delcastle Recreation Area. He now hopes to extend his distance running with a 10K and perhaps a half-marathon.

“About a year and a half ago,” his mother Eileen said, “Sean joined the Pike Creek Valley Running Club and coach Fischer and [Pike Creek club president] Ray Christensen have just taken him under their wing. He just took off and found his niche.”

Last October, Sean won the club’s Delaware Distance Classic 5K in 18:06.



“I like running,” Sean said. “Wind in my face and the challenge.”

Finding his niche as a runner

Coleman took up running as a teenager and joined the cross country and track teams at Brandywine High, from which he graduated in 2011.

“That was more for socialization,” Eileen said, “because he’d been in a home autism program, then he was in a private school and then we needed him to branch out.”

That team, coached by Michelle Flanagan, “was just wonderful,” she added. “He was definitely not a runner but completely welcomed on the team.”

Sean also swam for Brandywine and summer club teams. But to see her son develop into an elite runner is something Eileen Coleman never could have anticipated.

“He’s come from the most significant level of autism where he was totally affected, no speech, no eye contact, to where he is now,” she said. “He graduated from Brandywine. He has a driver’s license. He works at the Harvest Market in Hockessin.”

Sean's greater commitment to running sprouted, Eileen said, while being stuck at home during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and going out for daily neighborhood jogs. The gift of a runner’s watch from his grandparents that allowed Sean to keep closer tabs on his improvement spurred his dedication.

“He entered a 5K,” Eileen said of the 2022 Out Run Hunger 5K in Newark in which he placed second in 19:43.4, “and then the tide kind of turned and he started getting faster and faster and dropping weight. All of a sudden, I don’t know what clicked. But he works really hard at it.”



'Milestone moment' lauded by Eagles Autism Foundation

Sean is a big fan of Philadelphia sports teams – he was wearing a Phillies headband while running Tuesday – and heard an advertisement on the car radio earlier this year for the Eagles Autism Challenge 5K.

“He knows where he comes from, especially because his youngest brother Ryan is 29 and has a different type of autism with many other challenges,” said Eileen, who has four sons and a daughter. “Sean heard [former Eagles center] Jason Kelce on the radio and he’s a huge Eagles fan and he said ‘5K. I can do that.’

“We didn’t let them know,” added Eileen, meaning the Eagles weren’t informed this particular entrant actually has autism. “He just registered like anyone else and then won the thing. And nobody knew his situation.”



When event organizers did learn of Sean’s victory, they were delighted, sending him a hand-written note which has since been framed and hung on a wall at home.

“We heard about your milestone moment during this year’s Eagles Autism Challenge and wanted to send over a small congratulatory token,” it read, also thanking Coleman for his fund-raising efforts and “unwavering support.”

Coleman was also sent a box of team and Autism Foundation gear and other paraphernalia.

“They were all quite frankly rather shocked and amazed.” Eileen said, mentioning that sometimes those with autism just need time to find their niche.

“He has worked so hard to get to where he is now and it’s just so rewarding to watch him. The first time he won a 5K was the Food Bank of Delaware race just last year [in 18:25.3 at the 2023 Out Run Hunger race]. No one knew there either and I just dissolved in tears. People said ‘What’s the matter?’ and I was just like ‘Oh, you have no idea.’ ”

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