

The Chase Is On

*By Bob Schaller
Special Splash Correspondent*

Rachael Fishbain had a sack full of medals and ribbons to give to her team after the Eastern Classic in Atlanta last January.

Proud of all her swimmers, she had one big envelope full of medals for Chase Kalisz, who had entered all 11 events he was eligible for in the 10-and-under age group. He won 10 of them (eight individual events, two relays) and brought home a silver in the one event in which he did not get first (the 500 free).

That's quite a haul. But the week before Thanksgiving in 2002, Chase had started the hardest race he'd ever compete in – a race for his life.

The illness struck Chase's legs at first. He had trouble walking, and after a visit to the doctor, where he was initially thought to be dehydrated, he went home.

Chase was done walking at that point, for the rest of the year, and months beyond. He was crawling in the hallway when his mother, Cathy, and father, Mike, realized something serious was affecting their active son.

Fortunately, the family's pediatrician, Dr. Steven Dannenfelser, recognized the symptoms as consistent with Guillain-Barre Syndrome (GBS), an acute inflammatory disorder of the nervous system which causes weakness and often paralysis of the arms, legs, breathing muscles and face.

Though it only affects one or two people in 100,000, Olympic gold medalist Rowdy Gaines has also suffered through the disease.

"I was down for the count for a while," said Gaines, who was in contact with Chase, his family and coach throughout the ordeal. "It started with a tingling in my fingers and toes, and 24 hours later, I was paralyzed. There's no rhyme or reason to the condition."

Chase was hospitalized, and several cutting edge treatments were tried to minimize the effects of the disease. But by Christmas, Chase had not only suffered paralysis in his legs, arms and hands, but the disease had struck his lungs. He was hooked up to a respirator – as well as a half-dozen other attachments for monitors and IVs – to keep him breathing as his 8-year-old body fought with all it had. His coach, Fishbain, visited almost every night after practice. His parents were there around the clock, too.

Through the care of what his parents call "outstanding doctors" and staff over the course of three intense months when the disease was at its worst, Chase was eventually cleared to start rehabilitation as the feeling came back in his legs and arms and as his breathing improved.

“Every day in the hospital, he’d ask when he could come home,” Cathy said. “We knew he’d fight this with everything he had.”

Chase was given a walker to get around. He shunned it, choosing instead to prop himself up by holding onto furniture as he moved around the house. Part of the initial rehab involved getting into a water tank, to get the muscles working.

“It felt so good to get back into the water,” Chase said. “At the hospital, they had a little pool, and all I did was go underwater. My legs and arms hurt, but it was a lot of fun just moving again.”

His father credits swimming with helping speed along the recovery, which led one of doctors to call Chase “my little miracle.”

“If he didn’t have swimming – that background of being competitive in his life – it would’ve taken so much longer to get better,” Mike Kalisz said. “His physical conditioning was a very important part of his recovery.”

Once Chase made that first splash, he knew he was on his way back to full health. The first time he visited Fishbain and got into the pool with her, he promptly swam the entire width.

“Within five minutes he was swimming across the pool like nothing had happened,” Fishbain said. “Cathy and I looked at each other. We were both crying. It was like nothing had ever happened to him.”

Chase wasted no time, training with renewed vigor. His sister, Courtney, was a member of the 2004-05 National Junior Team and has made several Olympic Trials cuts.

“The whole thing was so surreal,” Courtney said. “To see him come back and be such an amazing swimmer – this little boy who had been paralyzed – makes me so proud just to be his sister. What he’s done is so inspirational.”

According to Chase, swimming – along with his family, coach, friends and doctors – made the recovery bearable.

“It was hard to be in the hospital knowing I was missing swim practice every day,” Chase said. “It’s like when you’re gone for a week out of town and then you come back, and you want to train harder. I just wanted to get better and swim.”

He pauses, then smiles and adds, “And I really like to win.”