



Sami and Chloe
hit the trails.

Running Mates

When the going got tough, cross-country runner Sami Stoner kept going—with the help of her guide dog, Chloe.

BY LESLIE GOLDMAN

At the start of eighth grade in 2008, Sami Stoner began having trouble reading her teacher's notes on the chalkboard. Despite new eyeglasses and a front-row desk, the outgoing then-13-year-old, who ran cross-country for her middle school in Lexington, OH, still struggled to see objects in her central vision.

Several months later at an ophthalmologist appointment, Sami's vision was measured at 20/50 (meaning she saw at 20 feet what someone with perfect vision

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saw at 50); four months after that, it was 20/300, past the point of legal blindness. The devastating diagnosis: Stargardt's disease, an inherited, irreversible form of juvenile macular degeneration.

“Those initial months were terrifying—I wondered if I would become completely blind,” recalls Sami, now 19. Still, despite all the uncertainty she was facing, she

knew she needed to keep running, which she loved because it cleared her mind and gave her a sense of normalcy, she says. “So many things were changing and I didn't want to give up the feeling running gave me of being able to rely on my body.”

With her vision deteriorating as she started high school, though, Sami could no longer handle the trails by herself. A close friend began to accompany her on runs and at meets. Then, in early 2011, Sami met her best race buddy ever: an 18-month-old golden retriever named Chloe.

Sami found Chloe through Pilot Dogs Inc., a nonprofit organization

that matches people who have vision difficulties with guide dogs. In addition to the standard five-month guide dog training for Chloe, Sami joined her for an extra four weeks of prep at Pilot Dogs' headquarters in Columbus so they could get to know each other. During that time, Chloe also began to build her stamina in order to keep up with Sami on the cross-country trails, which are typically three miles.

“For everyday walking, guide dogs plan their path about 20 feet ahead, constantly anticipating obstacles like cars and tree roots,” Sami explains. “But when you're running, that 20 feet comes a lot

Sami and Chloe after a run along the San Francisco coast, organized by the pet food company Purina.



faster.” Chloe learned to stop at street corners and pause when she sees a step or large bump coming up, alerting Sami to the obstacle. She slows down when running on uneven surfaces, and whenever she wants Sami to move over, Chloe will turn her head in the direction she wants Sami to go. (Sami still has limited up-close vision and can see Chloe; her doctors believe that her sight won’t decline past 20/400.)

Within five weeks, they became a team, regularly logging miles together. Sami, going into her junior year, was itching to compete again. But the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) did not allow service dogs to take part in official school sporting events and rejected Sami’s request to compete with Chloe. “I was determined not to give up,” Sami says. “Stargardt’s wasn’t a good enough excuse for me to stop living my life the way I wanted.”

After multiple appeals by her school’s athletic director, OHSAA reversed its stance, making Sami eligible to compete. Elated by the news, the new teammates planned

to run their first race together in September 2011, at the start of Sami’s junior year.

Before the race, Sami was all nerves. “At the starting line, dozens of thoughts and emotions flooded my mind: *What would the other runners think? What if the race didn’t go well? How would Chloe react to a crowd of 1,500 screaming spectators at the finish line?*” Sami recalls. “But Chloe was perfect—she didn’t even turn her head as people cheered our names. I think she was as excited as I was to compete!” As they neared the finish line, tears were flowing in the crowds. Even more impressive: With Chloe by her side, Sami ran faster than ever before, achieving a personal record.

Later, Chloe refueled with her favorite post-run snack: bananas.

Sami, now a freshman at Miami University in Oxford, OH, still enjoys daily fun runs with Chloe but the two no longer compete. (College cross-country teams average about eight miles per day, which is too taxing for Chloe.) Chloe and Sami also do fun runs to raise money for Pilot Dogs, as well as other charitable organizations. “It’s easy when Chloe is watching out for me. I know I won’t fall with her there.”

But Chloe is far more than a running buddy for Sami. “She’s my best friend,” Sami says. “When I was first diagnosed, I was terrified of what the future might hold. But with Chloe by my side, I’m excited again. She’s restored my confidence for whatever is on the road ahead, not only in running but also in life.”

LEND A HAND

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