Freshman Running Boston Marathon to Raise Money for Immune System Disorder

Taite Panton '27 has battled PANS/PANDAS since he was five

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The only time the noise ever truly stops for Taite Panton ’27 is when he’s running. That’s the lone way the UNH freshman—who has spent most of his life feeling “trapped in” his own body while battling a complicated immune system disorder that causes antibodies to attack the brain at any sign of infection—has found to consistently achieve a completely clear mind.

Well, he’s about to experience 26.2 miles of clear mind alongside hundreds of the world’s most competitive distance runners.

Panton will be running the Boston Marathon on April 15 to raise money and awareness for Pediatric Autoimmune Neuropsychiatric Disorder Associated with Streptococcus (PANDAS) or PANS, the condition that has afflicted him since he was five years old (he’ll be raising money for the JBC PANS and PANDAS Foundation). It significantly disrupted his home and school life and left him and his family searching for answers through a maze of confusing medical appointments and misdiagnoses.

His condition is now much more well-managed, and running has played a significant role in that process. It became an outlet for Panton early in his high school days, and he has continued to lean on the meditative benefits of the activity as a critical means of regulating his body and mind.

“It changed everything,” Panton says.
So, when the opportunity to run the Boston Marathon for a cause so close to him presented itself, he didn’t have to think twice.

“It’s the only time I really feel like I am able to think clearly. When I’m running, I can think about positive things and I’m able to step away from the reality that I have to deal with,” Panton says. “Growing up with PANS and PANDAS for a lot of people like me, there wasn’t as much support as there is today. I’ve always wanted to do the Boston Marathon, and now I can show other kids that have PANS and PANDAS that there is hope.”

Hope was hard to come by for a little while during Panton’s youth. Suddenly at the age of five, without any previous symptoms or warning signs, Panton began experiencing troubling racing thoughts, having tantrums and screaming fits and developed tics so severe that he couldn’t ride a bike or play with his peers. He would lash out at school and wind up getting sent home virtually every day.

He said he would experience emotions or contemplate things that were highly unusual for a kid his age, like when he was in the first or second grade and asked his mother why he was alive and what his purpose was. He couldn’t control his mind or his actions and didn’t have any idea why.
He was tested for all sorts of potential causes, including autism, bipolar disorder and depression. After two years of battling this seemingly endless cycle, doctors began recommending Panton be institutionalized.

It was three years from the onset of symptoms before he finally received the proper diagnosis of PANS, which had been triggered in his case by strep and Lyme Disease.

“I remember being a normal kid and doing stuff with my family,” Panton says. “And then all of a sudden things kind of shifted overnight.”

According to a press release by the JBC PANS and PANDAS Foundation, “PANDAS/PANS are autoimmune disorders that occur when an infectious trigger creates a misdirected immune response resulting in inflammation of the brain (Post-Infectious Autoimmune Encephalitis). Triggers can include but are not limited to strep, mono, pneumonia, COVID, influenza & Lyme Disease. Those affected exhibit life-changing neuropsychiatric symptoms such as OCD, tics, anxiety, rage, depression, insomnia and deterioration in school performance.”

The release further notes that “symptoms often come on suddenly and always leave families in crisis.”

Finally armed with a diagnosis, Panton’s family – at their own great expense – took action. Panton received 11 IVlg treatments in Washington, D.C., New York and Boston over the span of six years. His mother, Kim Panton, ultimately helped found the New England Pans Pandas Association an official outlet for advocacy and research.

"It's estimated that as many as one in 200 children are affected by PANS/PANDAS. Sadly, many remain undiagnosed or misdiagnosed with other mental health disorders. However, with proper diagnosis and treatment, these children can heal. Taite is a living testimony to this healing," says Jennifer Vitelli, executive director of the JBC PANS and PANDAS Foundation.

“I’m doing this to be able to show kids with PANS and PANDAS that they have the ability to do something like this or even greater – they could do ultramarathons, they could be Division I football players, they can do whatever ‘normal’ people do."

Panton’s treatment routine is now fairly minimal – he only needs to take antibiotics to fend off any potential bacterial infections – but he still has to remain vigilant about potential causes of infection or inflammation. He wound up in the emergency room once since arriving at UNH following a flare up as a result of an illness, but such situations are rarer now than when he was young, and he is better equipped to combat them.
Still, the worries tend to become fully silenced when Panton is exercising. He is an avid runner and biker and has found that the consistency of planning and executing a workout regimen feeds his appreciation for routine and data.

“It gives me something to focus on throughout the day. Instead of just focusing on a bunch of stressful stuff like work or school, I can think about what I am going to do tomorrow for my workout, what I’m going to eat throughout the day to get ready, stuff like that,” Panton, who is studying environmental science and nutrition at UNH, says.

His freshman year in high school was a major turning point, as when COVID hit, Panton spent a lot of the winter training on his bike trainer and doing homework, a routine he “found a lot of peace in.”

He says he built on that start and spent his sophomore year as happy as he can remember. Beyond the mental benefits of exercise, consistent workouts aid in managing his condition physically, too, as his body is in better shape and he says things like his liver and digestive system are able to function better.

Panton hasn’t yet run an “official” marathon, though he did run marathon distance twice last summer. He’s also biked 128 miles over 10 consecutive hours and has been ramping up his intensity training ahead of the marathon, embarking on lengthy bike rides while increasing his speed at specified intervals throughout. For all of those reasons, Panton says he’s not nervous, because he is confident he will be able to finish the race.

It’s still both daunting and exciting to picture running the race he’s dreamed of running since he took up the sport, though, especially in front of the large crowd of friends and family that will be heading to Boston to cheer him on.

But it’s not the people he’ll be with so much as the people he’s running for that will be the strongest motivational force on the day of the race. People who might be like the five-year-old Taite Panton, who could never imagine leading the life of a normal child again, let alone taking on a true test of endurance and mental clarity like the Boston Marathon.

“I’m doing this to be able to show kids with PANS and PANDAS that they have the ability to do something like this or even greater – they could do ultramarathons, they could be Division I football players, they can do whatever ‘normal’ people do,” Panton says. “That’s the main reason I am doing this, to show them that they can be just like anyone else.”

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