

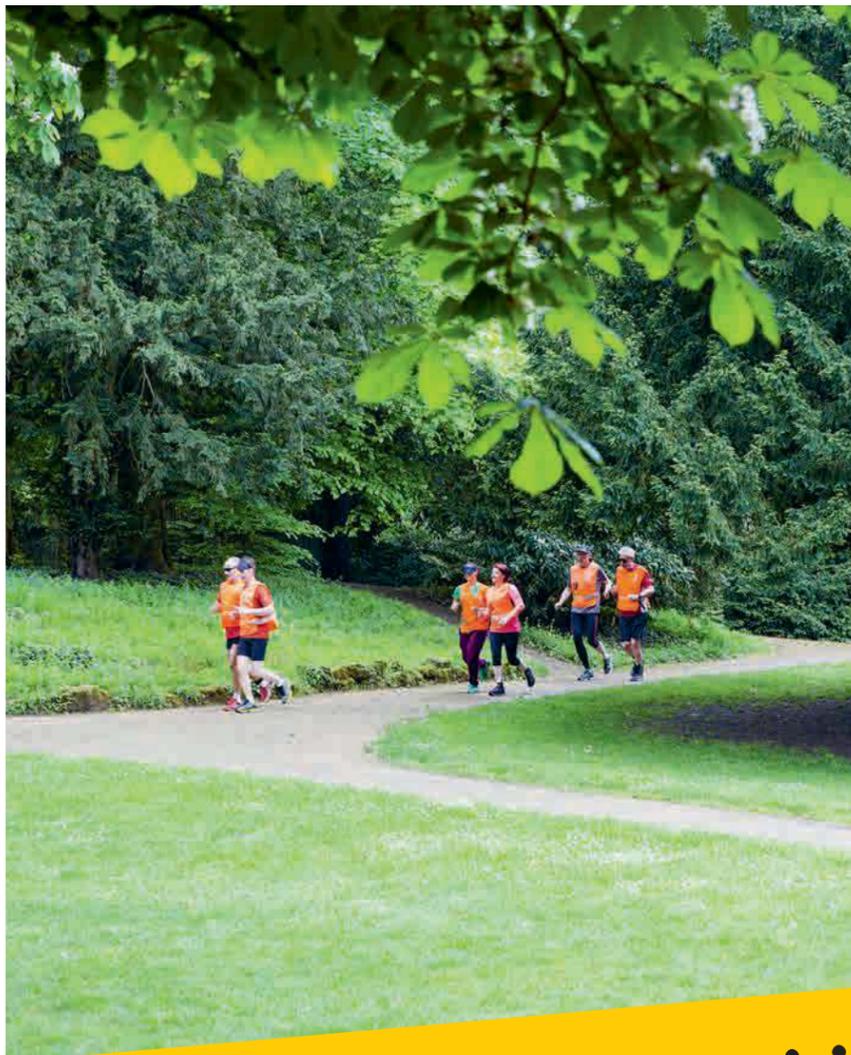
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Basel model catches on

Gabor Szirt, founder of the Laufsport für Sehbehinderte (running for the visually impaired) scheme and the Blind Jogging Association: “Visually impaired people can only train outdoors successfully and safely or take part in running events if they are accompanied by a sighted person. We hold almost 30 individual training sessions with visually impaired people per week. There is a demand for guides, so volunteers are welcome. We are pleased that this model is now catching on and is being imitated elsewhere. We receive inquiries from people, even outside Switzerland, who are interested in the Basel model.”



Photos: Alex Kasalin



Anna Schori (right) running with Ruth Eggerschwiler.

Anna Schori combines her hobby with social commitment: In her spare time, the Roche employee accompanies visually impaired people on jogs and walks.

Ruth Eggerschwiler and Anna Schori are jogging round the Rosenfeld Park in Basel in the early evening. They are running at a brisk, even pace and chatting as they go, just like ordinary jogging partners. Only when you get close to them do you notice that there is a tape linking their hands and their conversation is often interrupted by short phrases such as “Left!”, “Step up/down, three, two, one, now” or “Dog ahead.” They are wearing orange high-visibility vests to warn people that one of them is blind.

Ruth, who has had a severe visual impairment since her early childhood, trains twice a week. She has been able to jog outdoors for a number of years as she now has volunteer guides like Anna to accompany her. Anna has been at Roche for 15 years and works in the GPS & GMA Procurement area as an administrator responsible for the entire coordination, handling and ar-

chiving of contracts. Anna grew up as the eldest of five children on a farm in eastern Switzerland. Although there was little time for exercise due to all the hard work on the farm, Anna was definitely no couch potato, and is a keen skier.

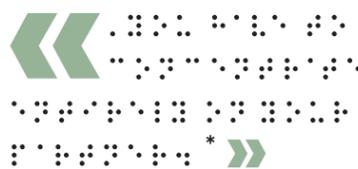
Train alertness and vigilance

She only began jogging just over a year ago when she took a beginners' course run by Lauftreff beider Basel. The association's director, Gabor Szirt, who has been working with the visually impaired for many years, was soon able to persuade Anna to take a training course on accompanying blind people. “I know a number of people with severe visual impairments, so I didn't have to think about it for long. At the same time, however, I was very daunted by the idea. After all, you have a huge responsibility as a guide.”

There was a lot for Anna to learn. In some training sessions, participants were blindfolded in order to teach them how important it is to approach obstacles such as steps or curbs front on and warn their visually impaired partners about potential sources of noise. Whereas sighted people are prepared for sudden noises such as a dog barking or a car engine starting up, such sounds can come as a surprise to blind people. In addition to mastering the instructions and learning how to run in step with mirror-inverted strides, the most important thing is to train one's alertness and vigilance. “It has changed the way I see

the world. Manhole covers can unexpectedly turn into stumbling blocks, and puddles, parking meters, changes of surface, building sites, roots and low-hanging branches can all pose a significant challenge,” Anna explains.

Communication between the running partners occurs both non-verbally via a tether and verbally. Instructions must be as short and precise as possible and, most importantly, must come very early. Just saying “Hill ahead” doesn't



*You have to concentrate entirely on your partner.

Anna Schori

really help. “Steep ascent for fifty paces” enables the other person to prepare much better for what is ahead. The most important requirement for a harmonious running partnership is unconditional trust. Ruth agrees: “I need to feel safe. It's much better to slow down from time to time than to get into a risky situation on some slippery leaves, for example.”

Other than that, Ruth, who works at the Blinde Kuh restaurant, is no more cautious in her running than a sighted person. She trusts her guide

“blindly,” and enjoys the exercise and the opportunity to meet non-disabled runners and take part in running events.

The challenge of mobile phones

In total, the guides hold nearly 30 individual training sessions every week. Anna now teaches others how to guide as well as working as a guide herself two to three times a week. She and her partners run in parks and the countryside but also in the city. The main challenge in the city, the Roche employee says with a laugh, is not the traffic but pedestrians who are staring at their mobile phones.

It isn't just the blind people who benefit from these shared running experiences. Sighted people can gain a lot from them too, Anna believes: “I have become much calmer as a result. When you're running with a visually impaired person, you can't get caught up in your own thoughts; you have to concentrate entirely on your partner and the route you are running. I take in everything much more consciously. That said, I can't compete with my blind running partners when it comes to alertness.”

Blind people partially compensate for their lack of vision by sharpening their other senses. Anna will never forget how, on one of her first runs, her visually impaired partner suddenly said “It smells of newspaper here,” as they ran past a kiosk.

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* Seeing through someone else's eyes.