

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

Imagine what it would feel like to tackle a triathlon as a completely blind athlete—to swim, bike and run among throngs of other competitors in total darkness. These remarkable seeing-impaired athletes are turning out in greater numbers at the races, led by athlete guides who must not only be a capable leader and communicator, but a well-suited athletic match. *Amanda McCracken* describes what it's like to guide a competitive blind athlete through a race, illustrating how triathlon can be the ultimate team sport.

Ivonne and I had just spent an afternoon riding small circles in Hyde Park on a tandem bike in the rain. Starting, clipping in, turning, accelerating out of a turn, stopping.

"I could tell you were a visual person," she said.

In many respects, Ivonne's trust in me was guidance enough to make us the team we became over a short week in London before the World Paratriathlon Championships last summer. I quickly learned the delicate balance between guide and athlete: equal and gracious trust, sensitivity to each other's feelings, and just the right amount of communication.

In 2012 a mutual acquaintance affiliated with the Colorado chapter of Achilles International put 37-year-old Ivonne Mosquera-Schmidt in touch with me—a triathlete who might be well suited for her size (5 feet, 90 pounds) and running speed. Ideally the guide is a bit stronger in all disciplines, particularly biking. In the swim and run, the

athlete and guide (of the same gender) have to stick closely together (one meter during the swim and a half-meter on the run), but on the tandem bike, nobody is measuring the power output of the guide potentially pulling the blind athlete.

GAINING MOMENTUM

In 2016, paratriathlon will make its debut in the Olympics in Rio. With its growing momentum, ITU officials say that paratriathlon has the potential to be the fastest-growing sport in the Paralympic movement. Less than four years ago the International Paralympic Committee announced the athletes participating in triathlon with some challenge would no longer be called "athletes with a disability" (AWAD), but "paratriathletes."

At the ITU World Championships in 2005, there was only one wave for *all* paratriathletes (then still referred to as AWAD). In 2009 only four athletes competed in the TRI-6 category (the division for blind athletes); Ivonne was the only female to compete. According to USAT, in 2013 there were 39 athletes in the TRI-6 categories, now separated into two separate seeing-impaired divisions: TRI-6A for those with total visual impairment, and TRI-6B for those with partial vision impairment. Ivonne and a few others had fought for paratriathlon to recognize the two separate categories. She is



unique to most of her competitors because she sees no light or shadows, having lost her eyesight when she was 2 years old due to retinal cancer. She now wears prosthetic eyes. And yet there are athletes in her category that qualify as totally blind because their doctors have confirmed that they fall below the standard for central vision.

RACE DAY CHALLENGES

When the gun went off we found ourselves in the usual crowded mess of a triathlon start, except there was the added challenge of avoiding tangled tethers. I took a brief moment to pause, orient us and then swim to the inside, definitely a bit off the direct path but out of the fray. Our tether was attached by small dog collars buckled beneath each of our inside knees. The short length of the tether kept Ivonne from straying too far from me. I did my best to coordinate my inside arm stroke with hers. One might think we'd be more likely to get hung up on each other, but in actuality, by coordinating those arm strokes, we had a better power stroke. If we didn't coordinate, my inside arm's pull through the water would disperse water under her and ultimately push her away.

I got us to our transition spot, put her hands on the bike seat and from there she was oriented to know where everything was to get herself ready. We managed to clip in and take off successfully at a wet and rushed mounting line. We passed at least two tandem teams who had wiped out and two other downed individual cyclists. Several strangers had come up to us the morning of the race and warned us to be cautious on the turns—speaking loudly into Ivonne's ear as if she were deaf, not blind. I was the eyes on the bike, letting her know when a speed bump was coming ("one, two, three, hump" I'd say), or when we were veering right or left or coming into a sharp turn. She gave me cues as to when to shift gears.

We finished the 14-plus-mile bike course not precisely knowing our place but knowing we had the Danes to catch. By the second lap on the run we'd put them safely behind us. I narrated to Ivonne the changes in surfaces, steps, bumps, water stops, distances and people along

the route. On the turns I'd gently take her arm to guide her. With about a mile and a half to go, an official on a bicycle rode up alongside us to make sure we were running side by side (within legal limits) and that I wasn't pulling her along. Ivonne sensed this and took hold of the tether with her inside hand, holding it close to my race belt so as to make sure there was no doubt.

The cheers grew louder as we approached the final stretch and I could see the unbroken ribbon at the finish. "Make sure she's in front of you," I heard her husband scream to me as we passed by him. Even without his anxious reminder, I remembered this important piece of guiding, and directed her with a little push in front of me across the finish line. "We won?!" she asked in disbelief after feeling the breaktape across her body. As we weaved through the crowds to reach our bags, I brought Ivonne's hand up to meet and shake hands with those who were congratulating us on the win. "You did it, Ivonne!" I cried as I hugged her. "No, we did it!" she corrected. ■

BE A GUIDE

As paratriathlon grows, more guides are needed to help these athletes reach the finish line. If you are interested in guiding in training or in competition, visit Achillesinternational.org. Also, check out Usatriathlon.org/audience/athlete-resources/paratriathletes.aspx



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