

Paratriathlon in the USA:

the Trailblazers, the Future and the Impact

By Mike Lenhart - Creator of The Getting2Tri Foundation

I didn't always work full-time for a non-profit organization. There was a point when the charity was just a project of mine. It was something I dabbled with on the side when I wasn't selling software consulting services for IBM, selling software for Novell or managing a territory as a regional publisher for Competitor Southeast magazine. But when I found myself focusing more time on the project, I knew it was time to either shut down the charity or take the leap of faith. I'm happy I chose the latter because there is no greater time in the history of the sport of triathlon than to be working around heroes we now call paratriathletes.

I'm not the first individual to put sweat equity into disability sports programs and, hopefully, not the last. The trailblazers before me include a "who's who" list of prominent names not only in disability sports but also in triathlon in the United States. Bob Babbitt and Jeffery Essakow organized the first San Diego Triathlon Challenge in 1994 to raise money for their friend, Jim MacLaren, who had recently become a quadriplegic after getting hit by a van during a triathlon event in California.

In 1997, Babbitt and Essakow, formally created The Challenged Athletes Foundation ("CAF"), which today stands as one of the most recognized organizations with an international presence to assist physically challenged athletes.

Matt Miller founded The C Different Foundation in 2005 after meeting would-be visually impaired amateur triathlete, Heidi Musser. Though blind, Musser is credited with opening Miller's eyes to some of the prejudices that existed on the periphery for those with visual impairments. Miller decided to change people's perceptions, even if only through one athlete at a time. Today, C Different is one of the great advocacy organizations for individuals with sight impairments.



Photo by Getting2Tri Foundation

Lastly, Jon Beeson is a long-time co-chairman of the USA Triathlon's physically challenged committee. Beeson, himself an amputee triathlete, has dedicated much of the last decade and then some to advancing the sport of triathlon beyond just the able-bodied community of athletes. Last year, Beeson was part of an international group that successfully brokered paratriathlon's inclusion for the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio. At the U.S. Paratriathlon Summit this past March in Colorado Springs,

for that sport. So beyond identification of the elite paratriathletes, there's a great deal of interest in grass roots programming that includes community programs and training camps.

While I cannot speak at great lengths on the identification, recruitment and development of the elite level paratriathletes, I can share some personal insight to the grassroots movements and why they matter. In 2006, I was a very average (at best) triathlete who was competing in many sprints and international distance races in the southeast. While I wasn't finishing on the podium, I was enjoying the like-minded individuals I was meeting through races.

I noticed the growth of the sport as measured by USAT annual memberships or single race day participants was growing exponentially every year. Strangely, this growth of the sport was nearly 100% in the able-bodied community. Among the physically challenged categories of athletes, the growth was virtually non-existent. At the same time, I started to notice a local, Atlanta bilateral, below-the-knee amputee athlete who was "winning" many of the sprint distance races around

Georgia. By "winning", he was actually getting first place awards simply because he was the only one competing. That guy was Scott Rigsby.

I did not know Scott personally, just knew "of" him. We attended the same church and one Sunday morning before the service began, I overheard him bragging to several people about some races he had just "won". I decided I was going to call him out on it! Now, I didn't do it that particular moment, nor did I want to get chastised for raining on his parade. So I decided to call him and introduce myself. I told Scott about a vision I had to create more opportunities for disabled athletes to compete in triathlons. We laugh about it now, but I believe Scott was



Photo by Lou Hablas Photography

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Beeson said, “We pushed for 12 years to get paratriathlon into the greatest stage on the planet.” Those are just a handful of names, all individuals I have had the pleasure to know over the past few years of my own involvement with athletes with disabilities.

The U.S. Paratriathlon Summit's focus was on two distinct areas. First, how can the United States identify top paratriathletes, get them the best possible training and resources, potentially house them in residency programs at the US Olympic Training Center and best prepare them to bring medals home for Team USA in 2016. Secondly, whenever a new sport is introduced into the Olympic or Paralympic games, historically there's a spike in interest

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initially taken back by my plans to bring more competition into the sport for him. "Hey, man", Scott would say, "You're going to ruin a good thing I got going on!"

Scott and I trained together for nearly 15 months through 2006 and 2007. He was the "pilot" case for the organization I started, The Getting2Tri Foundation. We picked races, mostly sprints or international distance triathlons or 5km and 10km road races at first, but then added a half marathon road race, a half Ironman triathlon and then a full marathon road race.

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Scott and I separately raced Ironman Coeur d'Alene in 2007. That day did not turn out as planned for Scott when a crash on the bike course ultimately prevented him from finishing. However, a few weeks prior, Scott was selected as a lottery winner for the Ford Ironman World Championship's PC athletes' division scheduled for later that year in October. Our training regimen significantly picked up to prepare him for Hawaii. Witnessing Scott crossing the finish line at Kona in 2007, his first

complete Ironman competition, remains one of my most favorite moments even still today. Since starting with Rigsby, I have been fortunate to meet with many athletes with disabilities, mostly those with limb loss, paralysis, spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injuries or other neurological disorders. I often refer to these individuals as my "heroes". Few go on to compete at the world championship level like Rigsby, but all share the common goal of getting back in the game.

Often, society will marginalize the successes of someone with a disability. Through rehabilitation, the individual may learn to drive a car, or tie their shoes or get dressed in the morning without assistance. While this functionality is important, there's more to life than just the basics of "function". Without activity, individuals who've become sedentary as a result of a traumatic injury are more likely to develop secondary conditions such as diabetes, depression or obesity and thus becoming further dependent on the healthcare community. It is because of this that grassroots programs of camps and clinics will remain increasingly important.

Sports are a great way to keep individuals moving, active and encourage healthy habits. Grassroots programs through CAF, G2T, Dare2Tri and others arguably create incredible opportunities for disabled individuals. However, the impact on the army of able-bodied volunteers who get involved is surprisingly even greater. Not pitching any particular charity, I suggest that everyone get involved with one of these organizations or other similar ones. Everyone who comes to a grassroots camp or clinic comes for his or her own particular expectations. When they leave, they will often discover a completely different set of outcomes. I'll never forget running into local Atlanta triathlete, Lauri Buell, in 2008 a few weeks after Getting2Tri's first paratriathlon training camp. I bumped



Photo by Lou Hablas Photography

into her in a bagel shop one morning, having not seen her since the camp. I asked her if she had come down from the "high" of volunteering. She explained to me how she had gone home the first night and cried her eyes out. I was shocked. She further explained to me, "I get upset about an ingrown toenail and yet, I was helping out Jenny, a below the knee amputee, who lost her leg after going in to have a bunion removed!"

The sport itself faces challenges with its rapid growth, however. At the elite level of paratriathlon competition, there's currently a shortage of international classifiers who can identify which one of six possible categories someone with a disability might fall under according to international governance guidelines. Classification creates a degree of fairness as it identifies what equipment the paratriathlete will use during competition. However, it's a sticky situation when, for example, a single above the knee, hip disarticulation amputee has learned to ride an upright bicycle with his single, sound leg, but the rules for that particular classification state the individual must use a handcycle. One wonders if this will lead to more categories. When this topic came up at the recent US Paratriathlon Summit, leaders closer to international governance suggested that if anything, the six categories might become fewer rather than greater.

Paratriathlon is also an expensive sport. Organizations that work to bring paratriathletes to the starting line not only need "time" and "talent", but they also need "treasures" that

are more commonly referred to as donations. Think about the costs within the able-bodied community for bikes, running shoes, wetsuits, training plans, etc. Then compare those costs to a laundry list for paratriathletes that might include cycling prosthetics, running prosthetics, hand cycles, racing wheelchairs and other specific adaptive equipment. CAF recently released numbers on its dollars awarded for 980 athlete grants across all disability sports they support: \$1.4 million in 2010. Getting2Tri reports that they've hosted four paratriathlon camps since 2008, training over 100 beginner to intermediate disabled athletes at a combined cost of just under \$200,000. Funding continues to be largely in demand during these challenging economic times in order to maintain these programs, grants, and expansion of the sport.

One area that many experts feel will not be impacted by the growth of paratriathlon is the need for specialized coaches. You may assume that a certified USAT coach would not be qualified to train the paratriathlete. However, successful coaches in other Paralympic sports were able to quickly make necessary adjustments so the same is expected with paratriathlon. One key point, however, is to include the paratriathlete's healthcare professional (such as a prosthetists, physical therapists, etc.) early on when developing the training plans. Finally, integrating the paratriathlete into existing triathlon or running clubs at community levels can create impactful training and success on multiple levels.

It's my hope that many of you will get involved at the grass roots level with programs that are already promoting healthy, active lifestyles. Your community will be better, and you will be happier because nothing brings more happiness in life than to serve a cause greater than yourself. tri



Photo By DaveM Photography

The Challenged Athletes Foundation, G2T and Dare2Tri are always looking for volunteers to donate time to their organizations. To find out more on how you can get involved, visit the websites below.

challengedathletes.org/site/c.4nJHJQPqEiKUE/b.6449073/k.8940/Get_Involved.htm

getting2tri.org/getInvolved/index.cfm

dare2trichicago.com/fundraising.html