

AGAINST THE ODDS



On The Road To Rio 2016

BY MARY KATE CALLAHAN & KERI SCHINDLER

I don't really like to use the word "can't," it's not part of my vocabulary. I also never thought the word "triathlete" would be one that I would use to describe myself, that was, until I earned it. Triathlon is a sport that I had little knowledge of five years ago, but now, as an accomplished triathlete, I have my goals set on representing Team USA when Paratriathlon makes its debut at the Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in 2016.

When I was only 5 1/2 months old a virus attacked my spinal cord and left me a T8-T10 paraplegic. Doctors told my parents I would never live an independent life, but my parents were determined to prove them wrong.

My earliest childhood memories always involved some kind of activity, whether it was being at the park with my friends, swimming on a local swim team, or water skiing at my grandparents' lake house. I loved anything and everything that involved sports!

Swimming really clicked with me and I spent many hours in the pool and at swim meets. I had grown to love the water, it was a combination of being able to set goals, the thrill of competition and the huge sense of freedom I felt in the water. Being a part of the swimming community also allowed me to meet so many great coaches that I looked up to as role models and big sisters.

One of my coaches, Keri Serota, was a triathlete herself. I had always been interested in just how the sport worked and how the human body was able to swim, bike, AND run. Keri encouraged me to try a tri and see how I liked it. I never thought much about it until 2010, when the International Paralympic Committee announced that the sport of Paratriathlon would be included as a medal sport at the 2016 Paralympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. It was at that point that I told myself I would try the sport and see how I liked it. In early 2011, shortly after the announcement was made, Keri Serota, Dan Tun, and Melissa Stockwell, co-founded and launched Chicago based Dare2tri Paratriathlon Club (www.dare2tri.org). It was the first USAT Paratriathlon Club in the country; talk about timing!



I am considered a Tri1 paratriathlete, which describes the fact that I am a wheelchair user.

In the swim portion, I just get in the water like everyone else wearing a wet suit and just use my arms to propel me through the water.

I pedal a hand-cycle during the bike portion of the triathlon and I use a racing chair on the run.

In the summer of 2011, Dare2tri held its first Paratriathlon camp, which concluded with a sprint triathlon. It was there that I completed my first triathlon and became a triathlete! I swam, I biked and I ran and after crossing that finish line I knew that a whole new world had opened up for me.

The feeling I felt when crossing that finish line is something so hard for me to put into words, but one I knew I wanted to feel again and again. I remember asking, “When can I do another one, I’m ready.”

I did not know it at the time, but I was getting involved in something that would change my life and allow me to travel around the world meeting so many tremendous people. Triathlon seemed like the perfect sport; every day the training was different and it provided me with the opportunity to continue to set different goals for myself. I have fun whenever I have the chance to race and I think that’s so important.

Approximately a year after being introduced to the sport of triathlon, at the age of 16, I traveled to Austin, Texas to compete in the USA Paratriathlon National Championships. This was going to be one of my first experiences at a triathlon with a large field of paratriathletes.

Meeting all the other paratriathletes was an experience in and of itself. Everyone had their own story but we were all coming together because of the love we have for the thrill of competition and the sport of triathlon. I placed third place in my classification taking home the Bronze medal. Shortly after the National Championships I was chosen to represent the USA at the World Championships that coming October in New Zealand.



I headed into New Zealand feeling strong both mentally and physically. Team USA had a strong team comprised of a great group of paratriathletes and I had gotten to know many of them through other races and training camps at the Olympic Training Center. I was the youngest member of the

team and I looked up to my teammates and even felt like some of them were like big sisters and brothers. Unfortunately race day was not how I imagined or hoped it to be. I finished the swim and came out of the water strong and in good position heading into the bike portion. I had an equipment breakdown on the bike, which caused me to pull out of the race. It's not how I pictured the race going but I knew this was something out of my control. They say every race can't be perfect and it just wasn't my day. I was so proud of the success my teammates and Team USA had that day. Leaving New Zealand like this left me more determined than ever to come back stronger.



Currently, I'm training with the TriCats at the University of Arizona. After my first race with the TriCats, coming across the finish line I heard "Mary Kate Callahan.... A member of TriCats." A paratriathlete competing with their college team... it just shows how much paratriathlon has grown over the past few years. With Paratriathlon making its debut in Rio 2016, I definitely have my eyes on that. In the meantime, however, I'm taking it one workout at a time, one day at a time, one race at a time.

There are many resources available for individuals out there who might be interested in getting involved in or finding out more about the sport of paratriathlon. People can get involved at any level they are interested in from recreational all the way up to the elite and competitive athletes. It is a sport that can be enjoyed by youth and adults and programs and clubs are now popping up all over the country. For more information feel free to check out <http://www.usatriathlon.org/audience/athlete-resources/paratriathletes.aspx>.

ABOUT MARY KATE & KERI

Mary Kate Callahan, an 18 year old Paratriathlete who is currently training in Arizona while attending The University of Arizona!

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<http://www.dare2tri.org/>