

## Paratriathlon Getting Started Guide



### Discovering Paratriathlon

Paratriathlon is an exciting, inclusive endurance sport that combines swimming, cycling, and running into one continuous race. In the sport of Paratriathlon events are sprint distance — a 750-meter swim, 20-kilometer bike, and 5-kilometer run — and are often conducted alongside traditional triathlon races with courses adapted to support athletes using assistive equipment.

Athletes enter the sport through either internationally recognized paratriathlon classification pathways or through Adaptive Triathlon Division 1 (ATD1), which offers more flexible participation options. This structure allows athletes of varying abilities, experience levels, and eligibility status to begin competing, develop their skills, and progress toward higher levels of competition.

Athletes may advance from local racing opportunities to national championships, and ultimately to World Cup and World Championship events by earning ranking points within their sport classification.

Whether your goal is participation, competition, or pursuing elite performance, there is a clear pathway into the sport.

**STEP 1: UNDERSTANDING HOW ATHLETES PARTICIPATE**

At the core of paratriathlon is a classification system designed to ensure fair competition. Athletes are grouped based on how their impairment affects sport performance.

**Paratriathlon:** Athletes have actively undergone the classification system of [World Triathlon Paratriathlon](#) and have been classified within one of the [recognized sport classes](#).

Paratriathlon Categories: There are three (3) primary competition categories with a total of nine (9) classifications. For the acronyms, the letters indicate the type of impairment, and the numbers indicate the level of impairment. The lower the number, the more severe the impairment.

| PARATRIATHLON CLASSIFICATIONS: |         |                                                                      |                                                                                                |
|--------------------------------|---------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| CATEGORY                       | ACRONYM | IMPAIRMENT LEVEL                                                     | REQUIREMENTS                                                                                   |
| Wheelchair                     | PTWC1   | Most impaired wheelchair users                                       | Must use handcycle on the bike course and a racing wheelchair on the run                       |
|                                | PTWC2   | Least impaired wheelchair users                                      |                                                                                                |
| Ambulatory                     | PTS2    | Severe impairments                                                   | In both bike and run, athletes may use approved prosthesis or other supportive devices         |
|                                | PTS3    | Significant impairments                                              |                                                                                                |
|                                | PTS4    | Moderate impairments                                                 |                                                                                                |
|                                | PTS5    | Mild impairments                                                     |                                                                                                |
| Visually Impaired              | PTVI1   | From totally blind with no light perception to some light perception | One guide is mandatory throughout the competition. Must ride a tandem during the bike segment. |
|                                | PTVI2   | Severe partially sighted                                             | All PTV1 athletes must wear blackout goggles throughout the entire competition                 |
|                                | PTVI3   | Less severe partially sighted                                        |                                                                                                |

**Adaptive Triathlon Division 1 (ATD1):** Athletes are considered Adaptive Athletes and follow the rules of Adaptive Triathlon which are more flexible in terms of allowable accommodations for accessibility. Not all impairments fit into the Paratriathlon classification or can follow the strict equipment usage rules of Paratriathlon however, ATD1 remains a competitive category and athletes are encouraged to race

**Divisions:** There are three (3) primary Adaptive Triathlon Division 1 categories

| ADAPTIVE TRIATHLON DIVISION 1: |                                                                                                                                              |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| DIVISION                       | DESCRIPTION                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>ATD1 Ambulatory</b>         | Athletes who can walk who may not be classifiable and/or require equipment adaptations and/or special accommodation.                         |
| <b>ATD1 Wheelchair</b>         | Athletes who use a handcycle and racing chair who may not be classifiable and/or require equipment adaptations and/or special accommodation. |
| <b>ATD1 Visually Impaired</b>  | Visually impaired athletes who may not be classifiable and/or require equipment adaptations and/or special accommodation.                    |

**Assistance Groups:**

Oftentimes, Paratriathletes and Adaptive Triathletes race with assistance. Here are the official definitions of the allowable assistance categories:

**Handler:** A handler is an individual who assists a wheelchair athlete with physical tasks during the race, particularly in transition areas. This may include helping remove a wetsuit, supporting transfers between equipment, and assisting with setup or positioning. Handlers may be a friend, coach, family member, or other support person chosen by the athlete.

Athletes are responsible for arranging their own handler for each event. While handlers are typically not required to formally register for the race, some events may require them to sign a waiver and wear an access credential, such as a wristband, to enter restricted areas like transition.

Handlers must not push or propel an athlete forward unless a clearly designated “push zone” has been announced by race officials. Failure to follow this rule may result in a penalty or disqualification.

**Guide:** The term Guide is strictly used for those guiding a visually impaired (VI) athlete. The Guide and athlete will be tethered together during the swim and run portions and will use a tandem bicycle for the bike portion of the event. For Paratriathlon, athletes and guides must be of the same gender.

Guides need to register for the event however, registration is free. Please reach out to the Race Director for USAT sprint distance races and reach out to USAT for the Paratriathlon Nationals Qualifier Series for the free registration code.

## **STEP 2: LEARN THE RACE**

Each race follows the traditional sprint triathlon sequence but includes adaptations to support athlete needs.

### **The Swim**

Athletes begin with an in-water swim start, leaving mobility devices or prosthetics at the swim start. For multiple loop courses, athletes are not required to exit the water prior to beginning their second loop. The athlete will stay in the water for the entire swim.

For swims that are point-to-point, the handlers for wheelchair athletes will need to move the equipment from the start to swim exit (to the Pre-Transition Area) and volunteers provided by the Race Director will move the remaining mobility devices. The devices will be moved directly outside the swim exit, located in a pre-transition area. After exiting the water — sometimes with volunteer assistance, which will be indicated by the color swim cap each athlete will be required to wear — athletes retrieve equipment and move into transition.

### **T1 (Swim-to-Bike Transition):**

Athletes must remove their wetsuit, goggles, and swim cap and place them in the basket within their designated space in the transition area.

Athletes may then put on their bike shoes or leave them clipped into the bike pedals prior to the race. Athletes must put on their helmet and securely fasten the chin strap before touching their bike. Athletes may also put on sunglasses if they choose.

Athletes will then run with their bike to the mount line. Athletes using a handcycle will ride their handcycle to the mount line.

Once the athlete crosses the mount line, they may mount their bike and begin the bike segment.

### **The Bike**

The bike segment may involve upright bicycles, handcycles, or tandem bikes depending on classification. Course design prioritizes safety, including limits on steep gradients (max gradient of 12%) and careful planning for technical turns.

### **T2 (Bike-to-Run Transition):**

Athletes must dismount their bike before crossing the dismount line into transition. Athletes competing in a handcycle will remain in the handcycle and must come to a complete stop prior to crossing the dismount line.

During T2, athletes will remove their helmet and bike shoes or bike prosthetic, place them in their designated basket, and rack their bike. Athletes will then put on their run tether, running shoes or running prosthetic, or transfer into their racing chair before continuing onto the run course.

### **The Run**

During the run segment, athletes may run, use prosthetic blades, or compete in racing wheelchairs. The official Paratriathlon Rules dictate that no run course shall have a maximum gradient over 5% at the steepest section. Guides must remain beside visually impaired athletes without pulling or pacing ahead.

Be sure to review [World Triathlon Paratriathlon Competition Rules](#) for more in-depth information. (pg 105-121)

### **STEP 3: BUILD YOUR ENTRY PATH**

#### **Talent Identification and Development**

Many athletes begin their journey by participating in USA Triathlon talent identification opportunities such as Virtual Combines. These initiatives allow athletes to submit performance times and potentially earn invitations to development camps.

The USAT Virtual Combines helps to find and recruit new paratriathlon talent, provide athletes an outlet for goal setting, friendly competition outside of racing, and give athletes an opportunity to gauge and track their current fitness.

How Virtual Combines work:

- During a month's span, athletes complete two time trials (TTs) — a 200-meter swim and a 1-kilometer run
- Athletes submit their times to USA Triathlon
- USA Triathlon's high performance team analyzes the times and invites select athletes to Development Camps
- **Submit your Virtual Combine time**

#### STEP 4: SECURE EQUIPMENT

Paratriathlon requires specialized equipment depending on classification.

##### Swim Equipment:

**Swim Tethers:** Tethers must be worn by visually impaired athletes and their guide. The tether must be an elastic rope with a bright or reflective color with a maximum length of 80 centimeters long measured with no tension. It can be fixed at any point of the athlete’s body. Most athletes will attach at the hip or at the waist.

**Propulsive Devices:** Artificial propulsive devices including (but not limited to) fins, paddles, or floating devices of any kind are not allowed. All prosthetic and/or orthosis devices are considered propulsion devices except for approved knee braces. Provided the equipment doesn’t offer flotation and propulsion, wheelchair athletes are allowed to use a knee brace once approved (the length cannot pass the upper half of the thigh or bottom half of the calf with a max thickness of 5mm). This means all athletes with prosthetics will need to remove these items prior to the swim and they can be reattached after exiting the water.

**Swim Caps:** For safety purposes, it's best practice to have a unique, neon color swim cap(s) that are reserved solely for the adaptive athletes. This allows staff, lifeguards, and other swim safety personnel to more easily identify adaptive athletes in the water.

Official Paratriathlon rules have specific color designations as outlined below. For local races with adaptive triathlon, these cap requirements aren’t required. One cap color might be used for all adaptive athletes.

| SWIM CAP OFFICIAL RULES |                                                                                                   |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| SWIM CAP COLOR          | SWIM EXIT ASSISTANCE                                                                              |
| Red                     | Paratriathlete needs to be lifted from the swim exit to the pre-transition area                   |
| Yellow                  | Paratriathlete needs to be supported to walk/run from the swim exit to the pre-transition area    |
| Green, Orange, or White | Paratriathlete does not need any assistance at the swim exit. White caps will be used for Guides. |





**Wetsuits:** The wetsuit thresholds and rules are slightly different for paratriathletes / adaptive athletes compared to age group athletes. Note: The use of wetsuit bottoms is always permitted.

| OFFICIAL WETSUIT THRESHOLDS     |                 |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| WETSUIT STATUS                  | PARATRIATHLETES |
| MANDATORY                       | 64.4F and below |
| PERMITTED (Eligible for Awards) | Up to 76.2F     |

|                                   |               |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|
| ALLOWED (Not Eligible for Awards) | 76.3F - 83.9F |
| FORBIDDEN                         | 84F and above |



**Bike Equipment:**

To compete in accordance with the Official Paratriathlon rules, there are strict equipment specifications for each of the groups listed below. Adaptive Triathlon allows for a bit more flexibility in the equipment measurements and also allows athletes to use equipment in combinations that are not permitted in Paratriathlon. Athletes compete the bike portion with a bike and helmet.

| BIKE EQUIPMENT:                                                                   |                                                                                    |                                                                                     |                                                                                      |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| UPRIGHT BIKES                                                                     | HANDCYCLES                                                                         | TANDEM BIKES                                                                        | RECUMBENT TRIKES**                                                                   |
| Ambulatory Athletes                                                               | Wheelchair Athletes                                                                | Visually Impaired Athletes + Guides                                                 | ATD1 ONLY*                                                                           |
|  |  |  |  |

**Run Equipment:**

To compete in accordance with the Official Paratriathlon rules, there are strict equipment specifications for each of the groups listed below. Adaptive Triathlon rules allow for a bit more flexibility in the equipment measurements and also allow athletes to use equipment in combinations that are not permitted in Paratriathlon.

| RUN EQUIPMENT                                                                                             |                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| WHEELCHAIRS                                                                                               | PROSTHETIC BLADES                                                                                          |
| <br>Racing Wheelchairs | <br>Ambulatory Athletes |

Run Tether: Visually impaired athletes and guides must wear a non-elastic tether. It must not be more than 0.5m in distance apart.

## **STEP 5: RACE AND PROGRESS**

Athletes can gain experience and qualify for higher-level events through national race series designed to support developing competitors. The USA Paratriathlon Nationals Qualifier Series serves as a key entry point into national-level racing. From there, athletes who meet qualification standards may compete at the USA Paratriathlon National Championships, where national titles are awarded and classification opportunities are often available. Athletes competing in the ATD1 category are also strongly encouraged to participate at Nationals. Youth and junior athletes also have dedicated championship opportunities, ensuring long-term growth and participation across age groups.

### **2026 Participating Races**

#### **2026 USA Paratriathlon National Championships**

To compete at Nationals in Milwaukee in the Paratriathlon category, athletes must be officially classified in a paratriathlon sport class, or have been given a provisional classification, and must meet the qualification standards found under Event Qualification Criteria. Athletes who are not currently nationally or internationally classified, but are interested in competing, may email [paratriathlon@usatriathlon.org](mailto:paratriathlon@usatriathlon.org) for more information about getting a provisional classification. Athletes who are not classified or who do not meet the qualification standards may choose to compete in the Adaptive Triathlon Division 1 category.

**Youth and Junior Paratriathlon National Championships: [Visit the race website!](#)**

### **Development Pathways**

#### **Junior & U23 Paratriathlon Development Team**

An elite group for young athletes (ages 14-23) developing their paratriathlon performance.

Team Members Receive: Coaching Support & Skill Development, Training Opportunities at U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Training Center, Connection with USA Triathlon National Teams, Travel Stipend to Key Events – National Championships, Racing Kits, Swag & Athlete Grants

#### **USA Paratriathlon Resident Team**

Residency includes group synergy with elite athletes and development partners. Team members receive onsite lodging at the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, daily meals, and group coaching led by U.S. Olympian Andy Potts in a high performance environment. Designed for elite paratriathletes with goals toward LA28 Paralympic Games and World Triathlon competition. Residency includes group synergy with elite athletes and development partners.

#### **USA Talent ID Program**

The USA Paratriathlon Talent ID Program is a high performance program that finds, funds, advises, supports and mentors Paralympic potential athletes. The TID program focuses solely on World Triathlon racing, with the goal of helping identified athletes go from being introduced to the sport of paratriathlon to being on the national team over the course of two years.

This program is highly exclusive, and only a few athletes are selected each year. The following is an example of the selection process and how the athlete goes from being eligible to being selected:

### **Pathway Summary**

Virtual Combine → Talent ID Camp → National Racing with USA Triathlon → Junior & U23 Team, Talent ID Program or USA Paratriathlon Resident Team → U.S. National Team → Paralympic Games

### **STEP 6: PURSUE CLASSIFICATION (If Desired)**

#### **National Classification Process**

Classification provides a structure for Paralympic competition. The Paralympic Committee has adopted a universal classification code. The classification process determines who is eligible to compete in Paratriathlon and it groups eligible athletes in sport classes according to their activity limitation.

All athletes who are interested in racing in Paratriathlon at the Elite national and/or international level need to attend an event where classification is being offered. A Medical Diagnosis Form, provided by USAT, needs to be completed by an athlete's medical provider, submitted to USAT at [auburn.bosworth@usatriathlon.org](mailto:auburn.bosworth@usatriathlon.org). If the Classifier is able to provide a provisional national classification, an athlete will need to earn a qualifying time based on their determined classification category and gender at either a USAT Paratriathlon Nationals Qualifier Series race or a USAT sanctioned sprint distance triathlon. If an athlete is not classifiable, they can still compete in the ATD1 category at the series races and nationals. Once a qualifying time is achieved, an athlete registers for the USA Triathlon Paratriathlon National Championship, USAT will assign a specific classification appointment to conduct a medical examination in the days leading up to Nationals for physical impairments. Classifiers will then assign the athlete a sport class for the race and then proceed to observe the athlete in competition during the race to finalize the classification status.

Review the [World Triathlon Paratriathlon Classification Rules](#) for more in-depth information

### **ACCESSING SUPPORT & RESOURCES**

Athletes entering paratriathlon may require adaptive equipment, training support, or financial assistance. A variety of organizations provide grants to help offset these costs, funding items such as handcycles, racing chairs, and competition travel. These resources play an important role in making the sport accessible and sustainable for athletes pursuing both recreational and elite pathways.

## Adaptive Sports Grants

| Category                 | Organization / Grant                                                                  | What It Funds                                                                                                                                                                                |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Adaptive Equipment       | <a href="#">Challenged Athletes Foundation Grants (CAF)</a>                           | Equipment grants (adaptive sports equipment including handcycles), training, competition support for athletes with physical disabilities. ( <a href="#">Challenged Athletes Foundation</a> ) |
| Adaptive Equipment       | <a href="#">Kelly Brush Foundation Active Fund (Adaptive Equipment Grants)</a>        | Grants for adaptive sports equipment (handcycles, chairs, skis, etc.) for individuals with spinal cord injury. ( <a href="#">Kelly Brush Foundation</a> )                                    |
| Adaptive Equipment       | <a href="#">High Fives Foundation – Empowerment Fund</a>                              | Grants can include adaptive sports equipment for individuals with life-changing injuries (SCI, amputations, TBI). ( <a href="#">High Fives Foundation</a> )                                  |
| Adaptive Equipment       | <a href="#">IM ABLE Foundation Grants</a>                                             | Adaptive equipment, handcycles & adaptive fitness equipment for physically challenged individuals in the Mid-Atlantic region. ( <a href="#">IM ABLE Foundation</a> )                         |
| Adaptive Equipment       | <a href="#">Team Catapult Athlete Grants</a>                                          | Funding for training, competition, equipment for adaptive athletes (including gear like handcycles). ( <a href="#">Team Catapult</a> )                                                       |
| Adaptive Equipment       | <a href="#">Triumph Foundation Grants</a>                                             | Support toward equipment and services for individuals with spinal cord injury (equipment assistance). ( <a href="#">Shirley Ryan AbilityLab</a> )                                            |
| Youth-Focused Grants     | <a href="#">Move United Youth Grants (Incl. equipment assistance)</a>                 | Grants to support youth adaptive sports participation (training camps, races, equipment referrals). ( <a href="#">Move United</a> )                                                          |
| Youth-Focused Grants     | <a href="#">Road Runner Sports – Athletes Helping Athletes</a>                        | Youth focused gear support program through Road Runner Sports. ( <a href="#">nwba.org</a> )                                                                                                  |
| Youth-Focused Grants     | <a href="#">AdaptX Grants (Adaptive Youth Equipment)</a>                              | Grants for adaptive sports equipment for athletes under 18 (basic adaptive gear & programs). ( <a href="#">AdaptX</a> )                                                                      |
| Veterans                 | <a href="#">VA Adaptive Sports Grant (Federal)</a>                                    | Federal grants through the VA’s Adaptive Sports Program — for adaptive sports participation and equipment support. ( <a href="#">U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs</a> )                   |
| Veterans                 | <a href="#">Semper Fi &amp; America’s Fund – Adaptive &amp; Specialized Equipment</a> | Assistance including adaptive equipment and recovery needs for veterans and families. ( <a href="#">Semper Fi &amp; America’s Fund</a> )                                                     |
| Veterans                 | <a href="#">The Independence Fund – Apply for Assistance</a>                          | Assistance for veterans (mobility support, casework, resilience programs). ( <a href="#">The Independence Fund</a> )                                                                         |
| Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) | <a href="#">Kelly Brush Foundation Active Fund</a>                                    | Adaptive sports equipment grants specifically for individuals with SCI (handcycles, chairs, monoskis, etc.). ( <a href="#">Kelly Brush Foundation</a> )                                      |
| Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) | <a href="#">High Fives Foundation – Empowerment Fund</a>                              | Adaptive sports equipment & recovery support for SCI/trauma patients. ( <a href="#">High Fives Foundation</a> )                                                                              |
| Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) | <a href="#">Triumph Foundation</a>                                                    | Equipment and services support for people with spinal cord injury. ( <a href="#">Shirley Ryan AbilityLab</a> )                                                                               |