

Disability Triathlon Case Study – West Lothian

Introduction

Triathlon clubs are at the heart of triathlon in Scotland, to provide more opportunities for disabled athletes to take part in the sport clubs must play a key role. In this short case study we will look at a club which has had experience of working with disability triathletes by hearing the thoughts of two athletes and a coach who are all members of West Lothian Triathlon.

The Club

West Lothian Triathlon is a medium sized club based in and around the Livingston area of West Lothian. The club, which has a strong culture of supporting participation in triathlon has members of all ages and abilities, from novice youth athletes to ironmen. The club has had the opportunity to include a disabled athletes from all levels of the sport, including youth athletes with learning disabilities and a Paratriathlon World Champion.

“As a parent to a deaf child, I understand the challenges and frustrations of trying to ensure that my daughter is included in sport and the wider community. Many of the difficulties can be overcome through simple modifications to how a club operates (being careful with the positioning of the coach for a visually impaired athlete as an example).

The most important change, in my experience, is to change the outlook of the club to being as inclusive as possible and having the awareness to consider these details. The coaches at WLT continue to be open minded to making the small changes that can make all the difference.”

The Athletes

Alasdair Lawrie



Alisdair a former boxer and all round sportsman was involved in a motorbike accident in 2000 which saw him lose his left leg below the knee. Following his recovery he took up distance kayaking which saw him paddle 60 miles to raise money for charity and then in 2013 got involved in triathlon at the suggestion of the NHS Limb Fitting Service. He has just completed his first season of racing in which he completed three local sprint distance races and even won his age group at one!

Alison Patrick

Alison came to triathlon in 2012 when injuries prevented her continuing a running career which had seen her compete nationally and internationally as both an able bodied and disabled athlete including an IBSA 800m world title. She is now a member of the British Paratriathlon Podium Squad, is current PT5 World Champion and is focusing on Gold at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.



Disability Inclusion in Clubs

What sparked your interest in triathlon?



Alisdair: I had been increasing the amount of running I was doing and began to have issues running with a standard prosthesis, I was offered a blade by the limb fitting service and while being fitted with this it was suggested that triathlon might be of interest given my background.

Alison: While at university in Birmingham I came into contact with a triathlete who encouraged me to attend a British Triathlon Paratriathlon taster session. I went along and enjoyed it but was moving back to Scotland shortly after so waited till then before getting any more involved.

How did you get involved with West Lothian Triathlon?

Alisdair: After the limb fitting service suggested I look into triathlon I did some research and came across my local club West Lothian Triathlon, I got in touch through their website and they told me just to come along to a session that suited me. I chose a swimming session as it was an area of the sport I was comfortable with.

Alison: Once I was settled into life back in Scotland I did some research of the local clubs thinking this would be the best place to start getting more involved with the sport. I decided West Lothian Triathlon looked to be the most suitable and got in touch with the club. Initially the person who I had contacted was a little concerned about how the club would be able to include me and this almost put me off getting involved but my family and friends convinced me to go along anyway.

What were your initial experiences of the club?

Alisdair: The club is really friendly and everyone is really welcoming to new members regardless of their ability or disability. I chose swimming sessions as I knew it was something I would be able to easily take part in, Andrew (the swimming coach) advised me which lane to join and we cracked on with the session. Some of the members then encouraged me to come along to the running sessions and to get out on the bike with other club members which I have done but I waited a while until I was comfortable running with my blade and cycling my road bike.

Alison: I was a little nervous about heading to my first sessions with the club after the email response I had received but once I got there it was soon obvious that the club as a whole was really welcoming and keen to help me get involved with the sport. After swimming with the club a couple of times I asked some of the more experienced members about cycling and they said they would be more than happy to pilot for me if I got a tandem.



How has the club been able to adapt its training to support you?

Alisdair: I haven't really found that the club has to do much as I can take part in the normal session. When working to improve my swim technique I have sometimes found that the standard drills don't work for me and in these cases I work with the coaches to find ways of achieving the desired results.

Alison: Just simple things like the coach remembering to stand in front of my lane when doing demonstrations and other athletes in my lane getting used to telling me the set as we go along since

I'm not able to read it from the whiteboard on the other side of the pool, though I am not sure it's easy for anyone. I am able to go out on normal group cycles so long as I can find someone to pilot my tandem, a number of people in the club have been happy to do this for me, they do need to be a confident cyclist for this and some of them did get a shock at how hard I worked them!

Graham: Coaches need to be honest with athletes and admit to any gaps in their knowledge. It is likely that the athletes themselves will prove to be the greatest source of knowledge regarding how coaching needs to be tailored to their needs. For example we didn't know what impact Alison's needs would have on other club swimmers but it was clear that she was determined to make it work and Alisdair has always been good at describing how his disability affects his swimming and this allows coaches to tailor their feedback accordingly.

How else has the club been able to help support you with triathlon?

Alisdair: The experienced members of the club have been able to help find events that are suitable for less experienced triathletes and has encouraged me to get involved in the events that large groups from the club are going along to.

Alison: Various members of the club helped me to get started doing events by being my guide, in pool based events this means meeting me on poolside, helping me through transition, piloting my tandem, then guiding me on the run. Other members have also been helping in any way they can, one lent me an old bike to use on my turbo and one has even helped me find sponsorship from a local company.

What message would you give to any clubs thinking about how to include disability athletes?

Alisdair: Clubs should treat disability athletes like they treat any new member, if someone thinks the new member needs help with something they should offer and if asked by a disability athlete for help they should always do whatever they can.

Alison: Clubs should have a give it a go attitude and do their best to support any athlete they can, they should get coaches up to speed on working with different types of disability athlete, but most of all, if they don't know what to do in any situation they should ask the athlete for advise!



Conclusion

West Lothian Triathlon is a great example of a club who have been able to be inclusive to all regardless of ability or disability. This has not been through a complex project taking up large amounts of time and costing the club a lot but simply through changing attitudes, advertising that they are open to all and working with budding disability triathletes to provide an environment where all can benefit. If they can do it then so can your club!

For more information head to: www.triathlonscotland.org/clubs/paratriathlon