

Cherry Hill paratriathlete makes her presence known at nationals

Five years after picking up the sport, Kelly Worrell finished in second place in the PTS4 sports class at the 2018 USA Paratriathlon National Championships.



Mike Monostra [Follow](#)

Jul 7 · 4 min read



Photo Courtesy of Focal Flame Photography

It's nearly impossible to describe in words what Cherry Hill resident Kelly Worrell was feeling when she crossed the finish line at the 2018 USA Paratriathlon National Championships.

Worrell was born with a congenital limb difference in her right arm. After picking up triathlons five years ago, she traveled to Pleasant Prairie, Wis., to compete in nationals for the first time ever on June 24.

“I wanted to get there and finish,” Worrell said. “Being competitive, I knew who the other athletes were and if I had a good race, there was a little chance I might get on the podium.”

Worrell exceeded her expectations, coming across the finish line with a huge smile as she finished in second place in her classification at

nationals.

Worrell, 41, has lived her entire life with a limited amount of motion in her right arm. Being born with a congenital limb difference, Worrell is missing her right thumb and most of her forearm.

“I have a lack of range of motion in my shoulder, my shoulder is underdeveloped,” she said. “I was born this way. It’s the only way I’ve known. It’s never really stopped me from doing anything.”

Worrell’s journey to paratriathlon began when she started competing in 5K runs as an adult. After seeing her uncle and cousin compete in triathlons, she decided to give the sport a try nearly five years ago.

While Worrell was a seasoned runner when she began competing in triathlons in the fall of 2013, picking up cycling and swimming were challenging. With cycling, Worrell competed with a mountain bike in her first race before switching to a road bike.

“I ended up buying a used men’s road bike, that’s what I raced with for five years,” she said. “The bike was adapted to the left, but I couldn’t switch gears.”

Despite this, Worrell was still able to hang with other competitors. Earlier this year, Worrell applied for and was awarded a grant through Challenged Athletes Foundation where she able to purchase a bike modified so she could brake and switch gears with her left hand.

“I have electronic shifting,” she said. “There’s an extender bar. It was a game changer, because now I can switch gears and it’s all with the left hand.”

Swimming is still something Worrell is trying to improve in. Her limitations with her right arm have prevented her from swimming freestyle quick enough to compete. She started out swimming the backstroke in competitions and later switched to the breaststroke to better her times in the water.

“The freestyle is just hard to me because of the lack of range of motion in my right hand,” she said. “And you can only go so fast in breaststroke

for that long of distance. So I learned a lot of things from some athletes with similar disabilities at nationals so I've been working on that.”

Despite the challenges, Worrell has not only competed at a high level in paratriathlons, but against able-bodied athletes as well. In her second year competing in the sport, Worrell even finished first in her age group in a sprint triathlon at Long Beach Island.

I finished in the top five in my first race,” she said. “I didn't do a lot of training, so the next year I went back and I actually got first in my age group against able-bodied athletes.”

“There were no other paras signed up, “ Worrell added. “They didn't even have a category for paras.”

Worrell said paratriathlons have become more common over the past two years. Competing in the USAT Mid-Atlantic Paratriathlon Series for the first time in 2017, Worrell finished in first place overall for females. This motivated her to try to qualify for nationals in 2018. She punched her ticket to nationals in early May when she won her age group in the Devilman Triathlon in Millville with a time of 1:35:45.

Between her qualifying competition and nationals, Worrell traveled to Pleasant Prairie to attend a camp with Dare2tri Paratriathlon Club. This was the first time Worrell met many other paratriathletes and coaches and felt the experience was valuable as she learned many new training tips.

Worrell returned to Pleasant Prairie on June 24 for the national competition. She competed in the PTS4 sports class. USA Triathlon describes this class as being for athletes with “moderate impairments.” Prior to the event, a panel determines which class each athlete competes in.

Within her own class, Worrell hung in the top three for the swimming and cycling legs of the race. During the second transition from cycling to running, Worrell pushed ahead to second.

“The whole time I was running, I was just trying my best to hold it, trying my best to focus,” she said. “One foot in front of the other.”

Worrell would hand on to earn a silver medal, finishing in second with a time of 1:32:59.



“It was unbelievable,” Worrell said of the second-place finish. “I felt like I was on a cloud. It was surreal.”

Worrell has big plans for her paratriathlon future. Worrell is registered to compete in three more events later this year and is going to try to apply for an international competition this fall. Worrell also plans to hire a coach in the near future after five years of competing without one.

“A huge dream of mine would be to get on the U.S. development team,”
Worrell said. “That’s a long-term goal. I’m a newbie still.”

