



THE TANDEM PROJECT

PARATRIATHLON
GUIDE
MANUAL^(c)

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WON WITH ONE

HOME OF THE WON WITH ONE TRIATHLON TEAM

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Introduction to triathlon guiding

So you've done it all in the sport of triathlon and now you have decided to try your hand at guiding a blind or visually impaired (BVI) triathlete.

Congratulations! You are about to embark on a unique experience with challenges that require a whole new approach and perspective to your sport. It is a serious responsibility having the health, safety, and well-being of another person in your hands. But oh, the rewards!

Take a few moments to study the contents of this guide, which provides all the information you'll need to safely enjoy this experience.

One brain, two bodies.

Triathlon is usually an individual sport, but, for guided athletes, it's a two-person team sport; a partnership of one brain, two bodies. It is a bond between you and your athlete.

As the eyes of a BVI athlete, you are expected to keep your athlete safe and informed at all times. The most important skill required to achieve this objective is the ability to communicate.

As a guide, you are "connected" to your athlete before, during and after the race. You train together and you race together. But it doesn't end when you cross the finish line. Help your athlete celebrate the achievement by making sure that he or she gets their finisher medal. Make sure they get a drink and something to eat. Bring them back to transition and help them gather their belongings. What happens after you cross the finish line is an important part of the day for your athlete.

In fact, verbal communication is at the heart of guiding. Your athlete needs to know what to expect on the road ahead, whether on the bike, on foot, or in the water. No one likes surprises when racing or working out, whether they are sighted or not. Let your athlete know if there is an obstacle ahead, a hill to climb or descend, a gate or pylon to go around, a turn to make on the bike, or a buoy to swim around in the water. Let them "see" what you see.

Be a good communicator and you will be an awesome guide.

But the communication shouldn't only take place during a swim, bike, or run. Before you take to the water, mount a bike, or hit the pavement, it is important to discuss with your athlete their preferences and goals, and then work together to find the guiding methods that work best for both of you.

Learn as much as you can about your athlete's goals and objectives. Are they training for a race or just working out for fun and to keep in shape? If they are training for a race, what do they hope to accomplish? What pace do they want to run at? What type of motivation works best for them? What guiding method do they prefer? What side do they like to run on? Do they want you to let them know where they are on the course at each kilometre marker? Can they take water themselves at the water stations or do they need you to help?



Don't wait until race day to start discussing these questions. Learn as much as you can about your athlete and how best you can help them. The more you know about your athlete, the more confident both of you will be.

And one more important point, if you are guiding during a race: let your athlete know when you are approaching the course

photographer, so that they can put on a smile and flash a confident high five! And make sure their jacket zipper is open so that everyone can see that flashy red and white WWO logo!

Guiding a BVI athlete in a big event can give you a different kind of high, one that you will take with you and remember long after you have removed the swim cap, parked the bike, and hung up the running shoes.

Swim. Bike. Run. Communicate. Tools of the successful triathlon guide.

Race information

Guides are not charged an entry fee when participating in a race. The registration fee is for the BVI athlete only. Guides are provided a race bib that is marked with “Guide”, while the athlete is provided a regular bib with their own number.

In triathlons where body markings are required, you will be marked with the same number as your athlete. Unlike age-group racers who are marked with their age, BVI triathletes are marked with “Para” on their left calf. Guides are marked with “Guide” on their left calf.

In most triathlons, the guides receive medals at the finish line, but this is a decision that is up to the discretion of the race director.

Not all race registration websites are accessible. Things are improving, but there is still some work to be done. You may want to consider offering to help your athlete with the online registration process if they encounter accessibility issues.

Guiding methods

The guiding methods included in this manual are those that members of the Won with One triathlon team have used over the years. They have worked well for athletes with vision loss or who are blind, and their sighted guides.



There may be other methods that you or your athlete prefer to use, and that's fine. As long as both you and your athlete are comfortable with the method that you use and feel safe throughout the swim, bike, and run.

You'll learn what works best for both of you by communicating.

We present these as best practices and lessons learned. You are free to adopt or adapt these methods.

THE SWIM



Swimming guide methods

Swimming with an athlete attached to you can present challenges, especially at the beginning of a race if there are a lot of swimmers jockeying for position.

Follow the tips and techniques outlined below to minimize these challenges and make the first leg of the triathlon a positive experience for both you and your athlete.

The following methods are those most commonly used by BVI triathletes.

If you are guiding in an event that is governed by International Triathlon Union (ITU) rules, you must use a brightly coloured tether. You can simply add strips of yellow duct tape to your tether to comply with this requirement.

Another ITU requirement is that there can only be 5 feet of space between your ear and that of your athlete.

Side-by-side tether

The side-by-side tether is preferred by athletes who have some light perception, as well as those with reduced central vision as a result of macular degeneration.

This method works best with a tether that allows for three to four feet of space between you and your athlete. To achieve this, you'll need to start with a bungee cord that is eight to ten feet long. Wrap the cord around your waist or buttocks and then fasten it with a slipknot. Your athlete should do the same. This will leave the optimum amount of space between you. Now you're ready to swim.

Let your athlete course-correct

The most efficient method of swim guiding is to swim as if you were on your own. This is not to say that you should ignore your athlete, but you should not chase them on the course. They are the ones who do the correcting.

Swim as straight a course as possible, just as you would if you were swimming solo. Your athlete will make adjustments according to the signals and feedback that they experience. For example, if you are swimming on your athlete's left, they will correct to the left when they feel the tether tighten. If they brush up against you, they will correct to the right. The straighter your course, the easier it will be for your athlete to make these adjustments as required.

If your athlete has some degree of vision, let them swim on the side that they breathe on most frequently. This will allow them to spot you with each breath.

Stay to the outside

The biggest challenge you'll face is that other swimmers may not be able to see the tether. They have no way of knowing that you are attached to the swimmer on your right or left. It is your job to navigate your athlete around other swimmers, and do your best to ensure that they never get between you and your athlete.

The safest strategy is usually to stay to the outside of the pack, and take corners wide when you have to turn on the course.

Swimming guide tips and tricks

--- **Be seen.** Most races that accommodate BVI athletes will provide swim caps that identify para-athletes and guides. If not, try to choose neon colours to ensure that you stand out in the crowd, and also to help your athlete spot you, if they have any degree of vision. Athletes with low vision cannot easily see blue and white, so try to avoid those colours if possible.

--- **Get your signals straight.** Agree on a signalling system so that you can get your swimmer's attention if necessary. For example, two tugs on the tether for an upcoming left turn; three tugs for a right turn; two taps on the shoulder to stop and lift head out of water in the event that you need to communicate.

--- **Quick release.** Attach the tether to a race belt instead of wrapping it around your waist or thighs and securing it with a knot. This will allow you to quickly remove it in transition.

THE BIKE



Cycling guide methods

BVI athletes participate in the cycle legs of a triathlon on the back of a tandem bike. When you hop on the front seat of a tandem, you become the “pilot.” Your athlete on the back is known as the “stoker.” In transportation jargon, a “stoker” was the person who tended the furnace on a steamship or steam locomotive. In other words, they provided the fuel to keep the vehicle moving. This is also your athlete’s role on the back of the tandem. Ideally, they will provide the horsepower to push the tandem, which allows you to maintain your focus on navigation and gearing up front. (But you aren’t getting off that easy—you still need to help with the stoking task!)

Riding a tandem is not much different from riding a solo bike, with the exception of needing more room for wider turns due to the length of the bike.

One of the biggest challenges in riding a tandem is coordinating the mount and dismount. You’ll need to very clearly explain the commands and process involved in mounting and dismounting the tandem. With a bit of practice, these techniques can be mastered and executed efficiently in a triathlon.

Mounting a tandem

Mounting a tandem requires a lot of upper body strength on the part of the guide—you'll need to steady double the weight as a single bike while you and your stoker mount.

To mount the tandem, stand with your strong or dominant leg on the ground while the other foot is clipped into the pedal, slipped into the pedal harness or placed on the pedal. Instruct your stoker to do the same. You both must use the same leg on the same side of the bike. Otherwise, you'll be working at cross-purposes and you'll struggle to mount and get moving.

Because you need to hold double the weight of a single bike, and must coordinate the mounting process, it is important for you to plant your dominant leg on the ground before mounting. Your stoker will have to adapt and use the same leg, even if that is not their dominant side. It's a safety issue—if you struggle, you are both at risk of potential injury. So, if your strong leg is the left, then both of you need to keep your left foot on the ground with your right foot clipped, slipped or placed on the pedal. Make sure that pedal is positioned at the top of the cycle.



Let it roll

When it is time to roll, do a countdown, such as “3-2-1-GO!”. At “GO” both of you simultaneously give a very powerful push down on the pedal and a smaller push off the ground. Almost all of the power should come from the pedal leg and NOT from the push off the ground, as biking shoes tend to slip on pavement; therefore, do not push hard off the ground.

If you are strong enough, and both of you are experienced enough, you have the option of mounting the bike with your stoker clipped in both pedals, while you have one foot on the ground. This requires you to hold up even more weight and is much more difficult.

Dismounting a tandem



To dismount a tandem, you and your stoker must agree on which foot to touch down when rolling to a stop. You'll need to let your stoker know precisely when to clip out and put their foot down.

Timing is critical when bringing a tandem to a stop, and if you don't want to hold the weight of the bike and your stoker, you'll both need to touch down simultaneously.

When you are rolling to a stop, don't forget that you need more stopping room than you would on a solo bike, so gauge your distance carefully. Try to slow steadily to a stop, rather than hitting the brakes hard and risking your stoker losing their balance and falling.

When it is time to dismount, call out the countdown again: “3-2-1-DOWN!”. At “DOWN”, you and the stoker should touch down together on the same side of the bike. When you have brought the bike safely to a stop, both of you can dismount. But remember to hang on tightly and hold the bike in an upright position while your stoker dismounts.

Cycling guide tips and tricks

--- **Communication is important.** As a tandem pilot you must always remember that there is another person on the bike with you, and they need to be told what to do.

--- **Coming to a stop.** When you are rolling to a stop you need to let the stoker know so they know to stop pedaling.

--- **Left or right?** When there is a turn you need to tell the stoker ahead of time, and indicate the direction of the turn.

--- **Be in sync.** When turning it is best if both of you put your turning leg in the up position.

--- **Length matters.** When you are moving over to go around an object you must remember that the bike is longer than a single bike.

--- **Communicate on the correct gear to spin in.** Some people like to spin in a high gear while others like to spin in a low gear. This is something that you must discuss with your stoker ahead of time so you can agree on an approach that will work for both of you. When you are going to shift gears, let the stoker know before you shift. And let them know if you are going to shift up or down.

--- **Up or down?** Let the stoker know if you are approaching an uphill or downhill.

--- **Pedal or coast?** Let the stoker know if they should stop pedaling while you coast downhill or if you are going to shift gears.

--- **Stopping takes time.** Remember that that there is much more weight on a tandem and therefore it takes much longer to get up to speed and much longer to come to a stop.

--- **Eat and drink.** As a guide, it is important to keep hydrated and fuelled on the bike. This means that it is crucial to practice grabbing and putting back the water bottle before guiding an athlete in a race. In long races camelbacks work well.

--- **Hold your stoker.** You can mount the bike with the stoker clipped in both pedals but this requires you to hold up a lot more weight at the stops and is more challenging.

--- **Give warnings.** Remember that whatever you as a sighted rider would visually identify as a hazard on a ride must be communicated to your stoker. Don't be afraid to talk too much!

--- **Learn the basics of setting up your bike.** You don't need to be a bike mechanic. Most races will have technical assistance available from professionals. But learn how to install the pedals and adjust your seat height. And keep in mind that your athlete may want to learn some of the basics of setting up the bike as well.



THE RUN



Running guide methods

As with swimming, there are several ways to guide a BVI athlete in the run leg of the triathlon. Regardless of the method, communication is probably the most critical component. You must let your athlete know ahead of time about any real or potential obstacles (curbs, roots, stairs, trees, other participants, traffic cones, etc.) that are in their path.

When participating in a race, you must use a tether regardless of the guiding method that you use. If you are using the hand-to-elbow, hand-on-hand, or arm-linked methods, for example, you still need to be attached with a tether.

A tether can be a rope, bungee cord, string, shoelace, lanyard, strap, or ribbon. There is no standard requirement on what must be used for tethering. The bungee cord is most widely used by those who run with tethers.

An important requirement to keep in mind when participating in races is that the guide cannot cross the finish line ahead of the guided athlete. Make sure that you fall back slightly behind your athlete as you approach the finish line so that they cross ahead of you.

Be the bumper

When you run with a tether, you act as the “bumper” on one side. The tether provides the limit on the other side. It is important for you to hold your position and let your athlete course-correct. When they accidentally bump into you, they can correct their course.

You must also be aware that your athlete can quickly be a three or four feet away in the other direction, even when you are using a two-foot-long tether because of the arm length of two people. So, especially when negotiating turns or obstacles, you need to continuously provide verbal cues, run with your arm close to your body, and tighten the slack on the tether.

When guiding in a race, it is a good practice to use a brightly coloured tether to provide increased visibility and reduce the chances of someone running between you and your athlete.

When you are running as a guide, be aware of the amount of ground width that is required. If there is an opening that looks wide enough for you to fit through, it may not be wide enough for BOTH of you to fit through. It is like adjusting from riding a bike to driving a transport truck.

Above all, be confident. Precise, clear and timely notifications are safer, faster, and much more reassuring for the BVI athlete.

The following are several different methods of guiding a BVI runner. No method is superior to the others—it is simply personal preference on the part of the athlete. Whatever works best is the best for that individual.

You may come up with other methods that are not described here. The most important thing is that both you and your athlete are comfortable and feel safe.

Side-by-side tether



For this method, use a light type of rock climbing cord and two clips to attach the tether between your waist and that of your athlete, with about three feet or so of slack. Your athlete runs next to you while you monitor the course and notify them of any obstacles in their direct path.

This method can also work where you hold the end of the cord in your hand rather than attaching it to your waist. By holding the tether, you can communicate with your athlete more quickly than with it around the waist.

Remember, you can never run directly in front of your athlete, pull them along with the tether, or cross the finish line before them. These will all result in a disqualification.

Hand-to-elbow, hand-on-hand, or arm-linked methods



Many BVI athletes, especially those with no vision, need some degree of physical contact with their guide while running. The following are the three most common types of physical contact guiding for athletes with little or no vision.

Even though there is physical contact, a waist tether must still be worn in races. However, the guiding is done by manual touch and verbal communication.

With the hand-to-elbow method, keep your elbow bent while your athlete keeps their hand on your elbow or links arms with you as you navigate them through the course.

The hand-on-hand method works in the same manner, with your and the athlete's inside arms moving in unison. When starting out, it may take a few steps before you get in sync, but once you do, it will quickly feel natural.

You can use light prompts on your athlete's arm along with verbal cues to provide directional cues. A gentle nudge or pull to course-correct can be helpful. However, it is also important to keep in mind that most BVI runners do not want to be pulled or grabbed unless there is imminent danger.

If you use touch cues, make sure that you discuss it in advance with your athlete.

Wrist-to-wrist tether



A wrist tether is a metre-long piece of rubberized material. Tension resistance bands that have been cut down work well for this.

The technique is similar to holding the tether in your hand. You and your athlete wrap the tether around your wrists, leaving a comfortable amount of distance in between yourselves as you run in unison.

As always, verbal communication is still important with this method. Remember not to pull your athlete along, but rather gently move their arm in the direction that you want them to go. They will detect the tension in the tether and will follow you naturally.

Rope

Some athletes prefer to use a rope rather than a bungee cord, as it gives instant feedback, whereas with a bungee cord there can be a slight delay in feedback. Also, a rope keeps you and your athlete at a more consistent distance apart.

To use a rope tether, tie a loop at each end big enough to get your hand through easily. Tie a knot in the centre of the rope to provide an additional grip point. When tied with the loops and centre knot the rope should allow for about two feet between you and your athlete, which is long enough to allow arm movement but short enough to be responsive to direction changes.

Running guide tips and tricks

--- **Be alert and communicate often.** Be aware of what is ahead of both you and your runner at all times. Be conscious of distances, ground width, elevation, obstacles and everything else you see with your peripheral vision.

--- **Call out potential hazards and specify what is coming up.** Warn of hazards such as slippery sections, gaps, puddles, potholes, obstacles, dogs, kids, other runners and everything else you might encounter.

--- **Give notice.** Prior warning is important if you might have to stop suddenly to avoid a dog off-leash, cyclists, small children, or other obstacles. Try to give at least three steps notice of an event. It can be useful to use a countdown such as, “Curb down in 3, 2, 1, down.”

--- **Be descriptive.** Consider the language you use to describe terrain, obstacles or passing other runners. For example, terrain, bumpy, uneven, rough, obstacles, dog off-leash, overhanging branch, passing another runner, pass left or right.

--- **Better safe than sorry.** If you are unsure if there is enough space for two runners to run past an obstacle, it is better to stop and walk past rather than risk potential injury.

--- **Be in control.** At times you may have to be assertive, especially in risky or hazardous situations. It’s perfectly fine to stop and go around an obstacle, or to physically move your runner out of the way if it’s too late, their safety is at risk, and the words don’t come to you fast enough.

--- **Be the navigator.** If you need to move in the direction of your runner, push their arm and say the direction. If you need to move in your direction, pull on the tether rope or arm and say the direction. Some runners may find it difficult to direct or be directed left or right. An alternative is to use “my side” and “your side.” When running with a tether, it quickly becomes apparent if a mistake is made as the tether will loosen or tighten.

---**Take the lead.** If you need to run in single file, your runner can tuck in behind you. Just say something like, “We need to get through a narrow gap here, tuck in behind.” Do not push the runner in front and force them through.

--- **Hold the tether loosely.** When using a rope tether, just loop your fingers through the loop rather than sliding the loop right around your waist. That way, if either one of your falls, the other won't be dragged down.

--- **Adjust the tether length as required.** In open areas use the full length of the tether to provide maximum arm movement. When there is a need to run close together, hold it almost wrist to wrist, allowing you to run forearm to forearm. In this way, you can provide a lot of natural feedback without saying a word.

--- **Consider switching.** In longer races, when you are guiding an athlete who holds onto your arm or elbow, you may want to switch sides occasionally, if they are able to run on either side. This will help to balance the load and alleviate the possibility of developing hip or shoulder discomfort.

--- **Announce your arrival.** While it may seem obvious to you that you are approaching the finish line, your athlete may not be aware that the end is near. Let them know when you can see the finish line, and tell them when you have entered the finish chute, and crossed the finish line. Celebrate together!

IN TRANSITION



Navigating the transition zone

As anyone who has done a triathlon knows, getting through transition quickly and efficiently is as much a skill as swimming, cycling, or running. It can be learned, practiced, and improved.

As a guide you have an extra responsibility to assist your athlete. Every BVI triathlete will have different needs and will require varying levels of assistance. It is critical to discuss this before race day. Find out exactly what your athlete needs from you.

And then practice it.

The T-zone can be a hectic, frantic place where the best-laid plans can fall apart under the stress of trying to get in and out as quickly as possible, without forgetting anything.

As the guide, you need to make sure you that you are ready to roll or run out of transition. And you need to make sure that your athlete has done everything on their checklist.

Practice makes perfect

Don't try to do this without practice. Set up a T-zone in your back yard or the local park and practice, practice, practice.

Practice racking a tandem, which takes a little more effort than racking a solo bike. Practice running next to the bike into and out of transition. Your athlete should hold onto the seat for stability and guidance. Don't forget to announce any bumps, holes, rocks, curbs, etc.

Let your athlete know when you have crossed the mount line, and then begin your mounting process (which you have practiced ahead of time!).

If you are fortunate enough to be in a race that is accessible and accommodates visually impaired triathletes, your section of the T-zone may be located in a separate area away from the hustle and bustle of the sighted athletes. This can help to reduce some of the stress and chaos.

But practicing ahead of time is the surest way to keep stress to a minimum.

Remember that the same rules apply to everyone in transition, sighted or visually impaired. The most important rule is that your helmets must be on before you remove your bike from the rack, and must remain on until you have racked it after the ride. Make sure you let your athlete know when they can remove their helmet.

Transition zone tips and tricks

--- **Practice.**

--- **Make a list.** Create a checklist and then make sure you check off all items before leaving transition.

--- **Practice.**

--- **Crossing the line.** Let your athlete know when you have crossed the mount line and are allowed to mount the tandem.

--- **Put your helmet on first.** Make sure that both you and your athlete put your helmet on and buckle the chin strap before you touch the tandem.

--- **Take your helmet off after.** When you rack the bike after the ride, let your athlete know when they can remove their helmet.

--- **Practice.**

Happy racing!

These guidelines are some tried and true examples of how to guide a BVI athlete in the sport of triathlon. The relationship between a guide and an athlete is a special one and we wish you many years of racing together!

One final but very important message: plan to stick around after you have finished your event to cheer on your friends and team-mates. The Won With One triathlon team has a well-established policy of remaining at the finish line to cheer on the competitors until the last member of our team has crossed the line. Your support and celebration of everyone's achievements are what it's all about.

If you have any other questions on how to work with a blind or visually impaired athlete, please contact us at info@thetandemproject.org.



Appendix

Alternative swim guide techniques

The front-to-back tether, foot-tap, and voice command techniques described below are not allowed in triathlons, but you may find them useful if you are guiding a BVI swimmer for recreational swimming.

Front-to-back tether

This method works well for athletes with little or no light perception, as well as those who have a narrow field of vision. Athletes who are completely blind or who have retinitis pigmentosa or other conditions that affect peripheral vision may prefer to use the front-to-back tether method.

The tether should be long enough to reach from your waist to your athlete's waist when their arm is fully extended, plus an additional half metre.

With this method, you guide swim directly in front of your athlete with the tether running down the centre line of the body. Your athlete keeps the tether between their arms while swimming. If they feel their right arm coming down on the tether, they correct to the right; if the left arm comes into contact with the tether, they correct to the left.

As always, you should swim the course as if you were swimming alone, and allow your athlete to make corrections based on their interaction with the tether.

Foot-tap

This method affords the inexperienced swimmer a lot of open water and is a good option for those with no vision.

With this method, you swim behind your athlete and signal turns by tapping their feet. For example, tap the left foot to indicate a left turn; tap the right foot to indicate a right turn.

You may find this method challenging, as you'll need to be very aware at all times of where your athlete is in relationship to others in the water. It may not be easy to navigate the swimmer through a crowded course using this method, but with a bit of practice and experience you should be able to master it.

Voice command

This method is the most challenging, particularly when swimming in a big crowd with a lot of noise. While it may be a preferred option for a swimmer that is totally blind and inexperienced, the guide must be a much stronger swimmer than the athlete.

Navigating a swim course while watching an untethered athlete, and guiding them using voice commands, is not an easy task. In this method, you should call the athlete's name and the direction he or she needs to swim. For example, "Paul right" means that he needs to swim to the right.



Alternative run guide techniques

The front-to-back tether and solid cane techniques are not allowed in triathlons, but you may find them useful if you are guiding BVI runners recreationally.

Front-to-back tether

This is a method that can work well for athletes with a narrow visual field as the result of retinitis pigmentosa or retinal degeneration. Your athlete wears the tether around their waist; you can either wear it around your waist or hold it in your hand. You don't run directly in front of your athlete, but rather at a near-45-degree angle in front of them. It is important that you don't pull your athlete along.

Another version of this method is the front-to-back with no tether. With this method, your athlete uses their limited vision to follow you. Depending on the amount of vision, this may or may not require much verbal cueing. If you are using verbal cueing, you typically call out obstacles as you pass them. Your athlete then mirrors their movements to yours.

Solid cane

This method works well for narrow environments such as off-road tracks or in busy places like running events. You and your athlete each hold onto opposite ends of a cane or stick.

Your athlete can get a lot of feedback from the cane as you change directions and pace, or move up and down over curbs. It also keeps your athlete at a fixed distance behind you.



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