

When Erica James dashes into the chilly waters of Smith Mountain Lake on May 6, it will mark a couple of firsts.

For James, it will be the start of her first triathlon, a momentous occasion. For the Smith Mountain Lake Sprint Triathlon, this will be the first time the event is a USA Paratriathlon Development Race.

As a paratriathlon development race, the SML Sprint Tri is the first of five races in 2023 that will be part of a series that is, according to the Team USA web site: “the premier national-level racing circuit for new and emerging paratriathletes in the United States. The aim of the series is to provide increased domestic competitive opportunities for the nation’s emerging and developing paratriathletes.”

James is among those who can be labelled as an emerging paratriathlete, having never competed in a triathlon, but she’s a veteran competitor in rigorous sports.

This might be her first triathlon, but her goals are lofty.

“This is a qualifying race for USA nationals, and I want to see if I can qualify,” she says. “There are few race options. I want to be able to go to nationals and see how I do against others.”

A long-time sprinter, James almost qualified for the Paralympic Games in Tokyo in the 100-meter dash. The top three made the team, but James came in fourth.

More recently, James has competed in CrossFit as a parasport, winning the 2022 and 2023 national championship in the visually impaired division. Crossfit, which requires a myriad of athletic skills as it tests strength, stamina, agility, mobility, and mental fortitude, was a sport she took to naturally when giving up competitive sprinting.

“Training in CrossFit I had to do swimming tests and biking tests,” James says. “That’s what got me interested in triathlons. Plus, I can age into the sport. It’s something I can do for many years.”

At 30, James is now where she needs the aid of a partner to compete in triathlons. She is almost blind.

“I have progressive vision loss. I was born with a rare cancer in my retinas, retinal blastoma. It was treated with radiation and I’m cancer free but have been progressively losing my eye sight my entire life,” James says.

I'm completely blind in my left eye. In my right eye I can see large shapes and colors, but I can't make out anything, I can't read, or drive and I don't recognize people.

Is blindness a disability? Not for James. She works as a realtor and owns a gym in Greenville, S.C., yet still finds time to train in some of the most intense and grueling sports. James is also happy to have a supportive competition partner, her sister Anna Tarbert. Longtime running partners, the swimming a cycling will be a challenge.

"It's going to be interesting," James says.

The pair are tethered together while swimming and running. They ride a tandem bicycle in the middle event as the sighted rider steers.

Paragames have a variety of categories because impairments are vastly different. The paralympic Team USA site lists 10 eligible impairment groups in the Paralympic Movement: impaired muscle power, impaired passive range of movement, limb deficiency, leg length difference, short stature, hypertonia, ataxia, athetosis, vision impairment and intellectual impairment. These impairments must be permanent and the result of verifiable eligible underlying health condition.

The effort it takes to compete with an impairment often inspires spectators and fellow competitors.

"It's so cool to watch," James says. "I got exposed to people who use wheelchairs and who still swim. It's crazy what you can teach yourself when you have that motivation."

The Smith Mountain Lake Sprint Triathlon will host competitors with many of these impairments. Adaptive bicycles and specialized wheelchairs for the run are standard equipment for the racers. Each will be racing in a division with competitors with similar impairments.

Selecting the Smith Mountain Lake Sprint Triathlon as a Development race makes sense for Team USA, All paratriathlons are the shorter sprint distances, a detail that suits James well.

"I liked being a sprinter and I like doing the 5k, but I wouldn't want to run a marathon after finishing a long swim and a bike race," she says.