

# ND spirit awakens...in Niles

## Blindness, cancer mere challenges for tough, inspirational triathlete

### MUM'S THE WORD

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NILES -- Where was the fight in the Fightin' Irish last Saturday?

It may not have been apparent at Notre Dame Stadium but it certainly was in Niles, a few miles north. That's where Lori Miller, a Notre Dame graduate with three master degrees, competed in the Niles Triathlon Super Sprint.

The 32-year-old Warsaw resident was among 152 competitors who managed to complete the 200-meter swim in Barron Lake, the 10-kilometer bicycle trek and 2.5-kilometer run. Her time of 47 minutes, 5 seconds was good for 116th place.

Such a finish might not seem like much of an achievement except for the fact Miller has survived breast cancer and cancer detected in a muscle in her jaw.

She's also been totally blind since age 2, when she developed cancer in the retinas of both eyes. On Saturday, she became the first sightless Notre Dame graduate to complete a triathlon.

Among those cheering her on was her swim coach at Notre Dame, Annie Sawicki.

"She's an inspiration. She beat four varsity Notre Dame swimmers" in the Super Sprint, said Sawicki, marveling at Miller's deed. "There is hope in this world."

The mother of a 2-year-old, Khareus -- it means "Inspiration" -- Miller said she turned to sports to overcome "negative feelings ... that ... creep in at times."

"I learned from an early age I could do anything I wanted if I put my mind to it," she said.

Canoeing, skiing, horseback riding and basketball -- "There was a crack in the driveway where I'd put my foot, so I'd know where the basket was," she said -- proved fulfilling but not as much as "goal ball." Miller defined the latter as a team sport similar to soccer but played on a volleyball court with blindfolded participants and a ball featuring bells.

"I was a center, so I had to cover a lot of ground on defense," she said.

Miller was a good enough athlete to win a championship in alpine ski racing for the blind in 1998, the same year she was diagnosed with breast cancer. After battling the illness, she turned to bicycling, on a tandem bicycle with a sighted guide.

"I poured myself into cycling. I went to Sydney (Australia) for the Paralympics in 2000," she said. "I love it. You can ride a bike just about everywhere."

Her expertise on a bicycle made that her best event in Saturday's triathlon. Sawicki said riding in tandem with a sighted guide -- on Saturday, Joe Durand filled the bill -- is a source of controversy, with hard-core triathletes arguing it gives blind participants an unfair advantage.

But Sawicki argued there's no other realistic way for a blind person to compete in the bicycle portion of a triathlon.

In the swimming part of the event, Sawicki served as one of Miller's two guides. Keeping Miller between them, they managed to keep her on a straight course.

"The swim was the trickiest. I hadn't swum in open water before," Miller said. "I couldn't look up to see how far the buoy was."

For the run, another guide, Brian Carter, ran beside her. The two mutually held a shoestring so they wouldn't lose track of one another.

Miller credited her guides with her relatively fast finish.

"Everybody did a great job ... It showed at the end," she said. "For me, it was pretty smooth sailing. I learned to try to conserve my energy, so I wouldn't get too wrapped up in it."

Maybe "getting too wrapped up" was what brought down the Irish against Georgia Tech. Should Charlie Weis need an example to inspire his team, he doesn't have far to look.