

'Iron Girls' finish strong in Howard

Sixth annual triathlon draws thousands to Centennial Lake

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Holly Allen, left, of Alexandria, Va., and Ashley Jaranko, ... (Amy Davis, Baltimore Sun)

Nya Ferrell found finishing yesterday's Athleta Iron Girl Columbia Triathlon an uphill battle – literally.

She managed to endure the sometimes steep 3.3-mile run, and when she crossed the finish line Ferrell, of Randallstown, heard the public address announcer bellow words that made her relish the accomplishment.

"Nya Ferrell, you are an Iron Girl."

Those words echoed throughout Centennial Lake in yesterday's sixth annual event, which featured more than 2,200 female competitors ages 12 to 71 from 25 states.

The triathlon drew a crowd of thousands who lined the course and cheered competitors from start to finish.

"You feel like a celebrity for a moment," said Ferrell, running in her first Iron Girl, about hearing her name over the loudspeaker. "You feel like you accomplished something."

Race officials said the course — a .62-mile swim, 17.5-mile bike ride and run — encourages a healthy lifestyle.

"We're trying to create wellness," said Robert Vigorito, president of the nonprofit company TriColumbia, which produces the race. "We talk about health care, but health care doesn't start when you have an illness at 35 or 45. It starts when you're 4 or 5 years old. That's when you've got to understand what wellness and fitness is all about.

"The one who can really instruct a child at that point is Mom. And if Mom is an Iron Girl, kids are going to look up to Mom," Vigorito said. "We have a kids' event, with 400 kids, and most of the moms coaching the kids are who? Iron Girls. The [Iron Girl] is very difficult, it's very challenging. But it's very inspiring for all the women."

Vigorito, a six-time Ironman Kona runner, is among those who announced "You are an Iron Girl" each time a runner crossed the finish line.

He said runners wore a timing chip on their ankles that indicated their positions by setting off a signal when they crossed a marker about 40 yards from the finish. The signal sent the runners' names onto a computer screen at the finish line.

Taking first place was Kristin Andrews, a professional triathlete from Chevy Chase, with a time of 1:28:16. Rounding out the top five were Rebecca Newton of Camarillo, Calif., Jennifer Will of Washington, Elizabeth Flynn of Ellicott City and Hannah Hanson of Frederick.

Robin Kovach of Elkridge, a [breast cancer](#) survivor, raced in her second Iron Girl.

"The first time I watched this race, a girlfriend of mine did it. I watched her cross and her two little girls were there and they ran across the finish line with her," said Kovach. "It brought tears to my eyes to see all the support, so I said, 'I'm going to do that.'"

Ferrell said that along the course women link up with one another and encourage each other to the finish line. She wasn't the only runner who found the uphill run a test of her stamina.

Gabrielle Descoteau of Columbia, running in her second Iron Girl, said it's the hardest part. "Running by far is the most challenging because it's last and it's hilly," she said.

Others racing included Jamie Rogers, a paratriathlete from Baltimore. Born with multiple congenital anomaly, Rogers has been active in sports throughout her life but didn't even consider triathlon until she saw her partner run in the Iron Girl.

"I said, 'Hmm, maybe if all these women can do it, I can do it,'" said Rogers, who has a below-the-knee prosthesis on her left leg.

"I'm slow, but I do it because I enjoy it," added Rogers. "The Iron Girl is a positive affirmation for women to try to step out of their comfort zone, out of their box. I'm all about being physically fit, and there are so many positive aspects about that, not only with regards to physical health but mental health and healthy ways of managing stress and promoting long life."

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