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Zionsville native has eyes on the prize at Mini Marathon

Professional triathlete finds deep satisfaction in competing, improving

By Kristen Leigh Porter

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Professional triathlete Kelly Handel has competed in exotic locales such as Cancun, Mexico, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.



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Professional triathlete Kelly Handel, 29, a Zionsville Community High School graduate, returns to Indiana to compete in the May 5 One America 500 Festival Mini Marathon. Handel, a resident of Austin, Texas, ran a 1:18.35 half marathon in Texas in January. Last year's female Indianapolis Mini winner won in 1:19:11. - Photo provided by Steve

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Handwerker

But the next big event for the Austin, Texas, resident will be back home again in Indiana. The Zionsville native, who also is making a name for herself as a road racer, will compete May 5 in the One America 500 Festival Mini Marathon.

"I'd kind of like to win it," said Handel, 29.

Handel ran a 1:18.35 half marathon in Austin in late January. Last year's female Mini winner won in 1:19:11.

Not interested in the corporate rat race after graduating college, Handel started doing triathlons in 2000 as a way to stay active. It became her passion.

"There's always that challenge of wanting to win that race or wanting to better your time," Handel said. "To me, it's a lot of fun. As weird as it sounds -- and there's always nerves and pain involved -- but at the end of the day there's a deep satisfaction in it."

By 2002, she was in Colorado training with USA Triathlon's Resident Team. Highlights of the year included a win in the Pan American ITU Regional Championships and a 43rd in the ITU Elite Triathlon World Championships. Handel was ready for another challenge by the middle of 2004. She now focuses on longer-distance triathlons, in which the bike and the running portions are emphasized more than swimming.

That's an added challenge for Handel, a four-year letter winner from 1997-2000 for the University of Illinois, where she excelled in butterfly, freestyle and individual medley events.

"That's what I like about it," she said. "There's lots of room for improvement."

Her favorite is the half-Ironman triathlon, which consists of a 1.2-mile swim, 56-mile bike, 13.1-mile run. As she says the distances out loud, Handel remarks that it even amazes herself.

So why would she spend hours pushing her body to its limit?

"Honestly, I think it's the purity of it," she said. "You're out there doing your own race and it's all about if you can do it or not."

Still, triathletes often deal with variables beyond their control such as weather.

Adverse conditions can vary from hot, cold, rainy or windy.

Said Handel: "It tests what you're made of. I kind of thrive on that and the feeling of pushing myself. I feel like I learn so much about myself through all this."

Following the Mini, Handel won't stay still for long.

On May 20, she plans to run the Memphis in May Triathlon at Edmund Orgill Park in Millington, Tenn. The race offers a \$2,000 first-place prize. Handel finished second in the female pro division last year.

Handel, who acknowledges that very few can cut it as professional triathlete, works for a publishing company from home and also serves as a multisport coach for Carmichael Training Systems. She hopes to add professional runner to her resume, eventually.

"It keeps me busy," she said.

Handel is the daughter of Charlie and Barb Handel of Zionsville. Sisters Cori Johnson and Robin Brinkman live in Carmel.

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