Special Olympics

Everyone Is A Winner

By P. Ann Tatum

Everyone is a winner at the Special Olympics. It is not being a winner in the sense that one enters a race and comes away with a medal or a ribbon.

Instead, for those participating in the games, everyone is a winner because of his or her becoming involved in an activity, a sport and succeeding to the best of their ability.

For those unfamiliar with the Special Olympics, it is an international program of physical fitness, sports training and athletic competition for mentally retarded children and adults.

The games were created during the late 1960s by the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation which also sponsors the program internationally. The Special Olympics is a non-profit, charitable organization headquartered in Washington, D.C.

While it is almost worldwide in scope, occurring each year in countries such as Canada, Ireland, Chile and Hong Kong, the Special Olympics has state and local arms which also sponsors yearly contests during the Summer and Winter.

Officials of the organization estimate almost a million mentally retarded individuals, age 8 and older, participate annually in the games.

Special Olympians are offered the chance to engage in 16 official sports at whatever level of the games they are involved.

Sports offered are track and field; swimming; diving; gymnastics; ice skating; basketball; volley ball; soccer; softball; floor hockey; poly hockey; bowling, Frisbee Disc; Alpine and Nordic skiing and wheelchair events.

On the national, regional and local level, the Special Olympics' Summer games occur usually during May or June. The international games, such as the event recently completed at the Louisiana State University campus in Baton Rouge July 12-17, are every four years.

Those games, the 6th international meet, attracted more than 4,500 athletes from every state and 50 nations as well, according to Special Olympic officials.

The Athletes and the volunteers who participated crossed all racial, social and ethnic lines: blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Indians and native Americans.

According to Joann Stevens, associate director of communications for the Special Olympics' international headquarters in Washington, D.C., some of the black athletes "whose lives have been changed" by joining in the games are Loretta Claiborne and Stephanie Brown.

Youngsters try hard in the Special Olympics

Ms. Claiborne, 27, from York, Pa., began training in the Special Olympics when she was 14, and after she had undergone a serious foot operation. Ms. Claiborne's doctors told her she would never be able to compete in sports, but 13 years later the determined young woman has run twice in the Boston Marathon and has won several state marathons.

Stephanie Brown, like Ms. Claiborne, was on hand for the games in Louisiana. She is a track and field athlete from Alabama.

Ms. Brown joined the Special Olympics when she was 8. Ed Stevens, a coach at Grambling University, said she later attended the school on a track scholarship, but washed out after one academic year.

Athletically, however, Stevens said Stephanie Brown "was one of the fastest athletes I've ever seen."

"Before Special Olympics, Stephanie and others like her saw themselves as failures," according to Joann Stevens. "They possessed little self-esteem and had few activities that they excelled in.

"Special Olympics gave them the chance to succeed at something and show the world their capabilities," she said.

The Stephanies and Lorettas are getting that attention and those opportunities because organizations such as the Special Olympics care. But the Special Olympics also receive boosts from civic groups, corporations and dedicated citizens who also care.

Corporations provide funds and needed know-how. Civic groups also play an important role in the Special Olympics family.

Last, but not least are the volunteers, people from all walks of life and interests who ban together to lend a hand. At the international games recently, about 5,000 volunteers were available to act as guides, coaches, fund raisers, entertainers, sports officials and the very special huggers.

With all this help and talent involved it is little wonder why at the Special Olympics, no matter what level, everyone is a winner.

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