

Special Olympics

For many young people with general learning disabilities, participation in sport and games is not only enjoyable but of tremendous benefit both socially and physically. Taking part in the Special Olympics is an experience that will be treasured by them for life.

Caroline O'Brien is a parent of a young person with a learning disability and a volunteer with Special Olympics Ireland.

A DREAM REALISED

Special Olympics is an international programme of year round sports training and athletic competition for more than one million children and adults with learning disabilities.* It started with a dream...that people with a learning disability could be perceived and respected in the same way as everyone else; that they could gain enormously from participating in sport through continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrating courage, experiencing the joy of achievement, being included in the community, building skills and making friends.

Special Olympics began in 1968 when Eunice Kennedy Shriver organised the first International Special Olympics Games at Soldier Field in Chicago. Her philosophy was simple enough – that people with learning disabilities can, with proper instruction and encouragement, enjoy, learn and benefit from participation in individual and team sports, adapted as necessary to meet the needs of the athlete. She saw that people with a learning disability were far more capable in sports and physical activities than many experts had previously thought. Her ultimate goal was to help people with learning disabilities participate as productive and respected members of society at large, by offering them a fair opportunity to develop and demonstrate their skills and talents through sports training and competition, and by increasing public awareness of their capabilities and needs.

Special Olympics believes that consistent training under the guidance of qualified coaches, with emphasis on physical conditioning, is essential to the development of sports skills, and competition among those of equal abilities is the most appropriate means of testing these skills, measuring progress and providing incentives for personal growth.

FAIR CHALLENGE

In contrast to other sporting organisations which may cater only for elite athletes, Special Olympics is unique in the system of divisioning which is used at all games and competitions. Divisioning is the process for placing athletes or teams against other individuals or teams of approximately the same ability, thereby giving each athlete or team the opportunity to be successful. Divisioning is based on accurate records of previous performance or trial heats and when relevant, by age and gender grouping. Special Olympics has developed a set of sports rules to govern its competitions based on International Sport Governing Body Rules, which have been modified, where necessary, to allow athletes of all ability levels to compete within them.

There is an extensive competition structure in place at the following levels: Local Games, Regional Games, Single Sports Tournaments, National Games, European Games and World Games. In addition to 52 United States programmes, there are 142 accredited national programmes throughout the world.

SPECIAL OLYMPICS IRELAND

Introduced to Ireland in 1978, Special Olympics Ireland is accredited by Special Olympics Inc. to organise year round training programmes and athletic competitions for Ireland's citizens with learning disabilities. Having started with athletics and swimming, the programme quickly expanded to include 11 sports (Alpine skiing, aquatics, athletics, basketball, 10-pin bowling, equestrian events, floor hockey, golf, gymnastics, soccer and table tennis) involving athletes with low motor abilities to highly skilled athletes who compete in and out of Special Olympics. Unified sport is an additional opportunity within the Special Olympics programme in which athletes

can participate, train and compete on the same team with a proportionate number of athletes without a learning disability of comparable age and ability.

Special Olympics Ireland also has as part of its programme, a motor activities programme which is designed for athletes who have not, as yet, the required skills necessary to compete in the regular sports programme. This programme provides a comprehensive motor activity and recreational training curriculum and emphasises training and participation rather than competition. Once athletes have attained the necessary skills to compete safely in an event, they will then move into that event within the regular Special Olympics sports programme. The development of this programme emphasises the commitment of Special Olympics Ireland to offer participation opportunities for athletes with a learning disability regardless of their level of ability.

Special Olympics Ireland is administered on an all-Ireland basis by a Board of Directors which includes provincial representatives. The Board is the governing body for the entire programme and creates policies and oversees events organised at all levels – local, regional, national and participation in international events. A management committee organises the day to day running of the programme. Special Olympics has a full time National Director, Technical Director, four regional staff and administrative staff. Special Olympics Ireland is divided into the four provinces for the purposes of conducting training and competition programmes.

BACKBONE

Volunteers are essential in enabling Special Olympics offer this year round programme of sports training and competition to thousands of athletes in Ireland. Volunteers contribute in a variety of roles within the Special Olympics programme at all levels of the organisation. Volunteers are the backbone of Special Olympics Ireland and its associated activities. They are recruited from all strands of society, i.e. senior citizens, business people, family members of athletes, coaches, civic organisations, students and mainstream sports clubs. The level of commitment of the person who volunteers is also wide ranging. The main areas of involvement for volunteers are as follows: events and games, coaching and administration in clubs and

schools, administration, fund-raising, transportation, public awareness, committees and chaperones.

The Special Olympics Programme also has an active families programme which promotes family participation in the organisation in a variety of ways including coaching, presentations on Special Olympics to interested groups and providing a newsletter three times a year.

WORLD GAMES IN IRELAND – 2003

There has been a lot of favourable interest in Special Olympics Ireland following the announcement that Ireland has been selected to host the Special Olympics World Summer Games in 2003. This will be the first time that the World Summer Games have been held outside the United States of America. These Games will showcase the athletic skills, courage, and dignity of 7,000 athletes with a learning disability from around the world. The 2003 Games will be the biggest sporting and cultural event ever staged in this country. Special Olympics World Summer Games are also the largest sporting event in the world in each year that it is held. The competition in 19 sports will be held over 10 days. While final dates have yet to be confirmed, the opening ceremony will take place at Croke Park in Dublin with the most likely date being Thursday, 26th June, 2003. There will be a variety of venues and locations around Dublin including Morton Stadium, the National Basketball Arena, R.D.S., The Point, Kill International Equestrian Centre, UCD., DCU, the National Badminton Centre, and the Phoenix Park. In addition to the 7,000 athletes and coaches, over 30,000 family members and supporters are expected to travel to Ireland for these World Games.

FURTHER INFORMATION

To be eligible to participate in the Special Olympics Programme, an individual must be at least eight years old and have been identified by an agency or professional as having a learning disability, cognitive delays as measured by formal assessment, significant learning or vocational problems due to cognitive delay that require or have required specially designed instruction.

For further information, or if you wish to set up a club, please contact **Special Olympics Ireland at Park House, North Circular Rd., Dublin 7 (Phone: 01-882-3972; Fax: 01-868-8250).**

* For the benefit of our readers abroad, the term 'learning disability' refers to those people with *general* learning disability/mental handicap/retardation.