

// givingback

Special Winter Olympics

// BY JACKIE BOEHM
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SPECIAL OLYMPICS OF NORTH CAROLINA

MORRISVILLE, NC IS HOME TO THE NORTH CAROLINA headquarters for the Special Olympics, a nonprofit that provides athletic programs for individuals with intellectual disabilities. The first North Carolina games were held in 1970 with only a few hundred athletes; today, the organization has more than 40,000 registered individuals. The North Carolina nonprofit is one of the largest Special Olympics programs in the world, with participants ranging from Pre-K children to adulthood.

Individuals with intellectual disabilities are given the chance to participate in year-round sports training and competition. The Special Olympics acknowledge athletes in statewide, nationwide and world competitions.

SONC is about community and creating a space for athletes and families to unite with one another. Often times, family members of an athlete will volunteer with the organization in some way. This is a safe place for families to create a support system. The games - along with the training - create a sense of confidence through teamwork, competition and celebration.

President/CEO of Special Olympics North Carolina, Keith L. Fishburne, recognizes the impact of the organization. "Sports is a common denominator that brings people together. Our coaches and parents see a remarkable change in the athletes' lives because of what sports brings to them."

There are nearly two dozen sports offered by SONC. Among these sports are sailing, equestrian, powerlifting and figure skating. Each event has a designated coach and training schedule. Athletes may not become competition-ready from the beginning - it's with routine practice and guidance that skill is born. Each coach is put through proper training and has an understanding that training may be elongated.

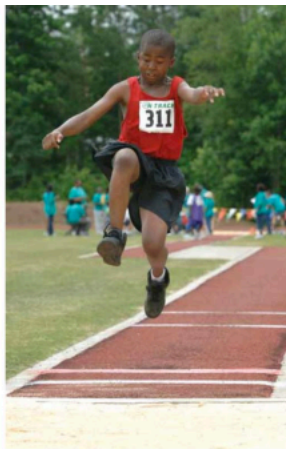


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To kickoff 2017, coaches and athletes have been preparing for the SONC 2017 Winter Games, set for January 8th & 9th. More than 100 alpine skiers and snowboarders will travel to Appalachian Ski Mountain outside of Boone to compete against other state-level athletes. Events are created for athletes of each level. "The Glade" is suitable for beginners, where coaches may assist on less difficult terrains with a slight slope. Seasoned competitors can compete in the Advanced Slalom, where the terrain is much steeper with tighter turns, often referred to as the "Black Run."

The Special Olympics World Games are held from March 14th-March 25th in Graz, Schisaming and Ramsau, Austria. SONC is proudly sending two of its athletes to these games. Kristen Misteard of Mooresville has been involved with the Special Olympics for 16 years and will compete in alpine skiing. Maurice Watts of High Point has been involved with Special Olympics for 22 years and will also compete in Alpine skiing. Just as The Olympics does, The Special Olympics World Winter Games will begin and end with ceremonies televised globally by ESPN. Winners will receive gold, silver or bronze medals.

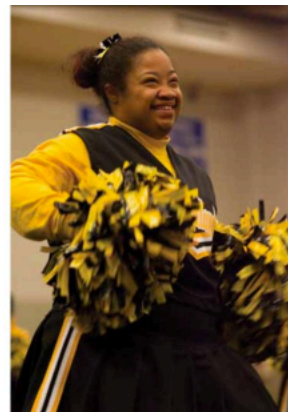
SONC has partnered with many health-related organizations to bring the best health initiatives to their athletes. "Unlike in earlier years, we now have the ability to identify health issues and work with the athletes and families on scheduling follow-up appointments with their doctors," Fishburne explains.

Examinations include, but are not limited to, physicals, hearing, vision and dental. Through the various partnerships, Med Fests are held to offer routine medical checkups. This brings knowledge and awareness to the overall wellbeing of the athletes.

Bridging the gap between athletes with intellectual disabilities and those without is important to SONC. Through Unified Champion Schools, students come together in social settings. The UCS is an all-inclusive program that gives students without intellectual disabilities exposure and education to those who have an intellectual disability. Students are able to support one another and share in their similarities.

"We're working in close to 350 schools across the state. We encourage students to participate in unified sports, form friendships through social activities, and educate their entire school population through whole-school leadership activities," Fishburne states.

On March 1st, 2017, students in statewide leadership positions will unite in downtown Raleigh to bring awareness to derogatory terms associated with intellectual disabilities, such as "retard" or "retarded". The goal is to encourage everyone to end the use of the R-word. In its first year in Raleigh, students and educators are taking action to create a better world for everyone. You can support them and this movement by showing up on the lawn area outside the NC Department of Public Instruction during the lunch hour.



SONC is more than athletics. It's teamwork, health and wellness, and programs that build awareness on the positive impact people with intellectual disabilities can have in our communities. If you'd like to become involved, you can do so by serving as a coach or participating in fundraising.

Athletes are never charged a fee to be involved in the Special Olympics, making fundraising important. "All of our programs and services are provided due to donations made to SONC," said Fishburne. "We want everyone with an intellectual disability to feel welcomed and to be involved in sports if they choose to do so."

For more information, visit www.sonc.net.

