

"For me, it was always about getting the young people involved as leaders. That's one of the great things my mother did. She made people believe they could be the agents of change." — Tim Shriver



Good Gamesmanship

SPECIAL OLYMPICS COLORADO PULLS ATHLETES OFF THE SIDELINES AND INTO THE GAME, REAPING PHYSICAL AND MENTAL BENEFITS. by Melissa Taylor

If it weren't for the Special Olympics, T.J. Trump might have been a sideline dweller. The 18-year-old from Durango says the event, and the organization in general, has allowed him to participate in high school sports — and be more athletic in general.

Which is a big deal for someone who suffers from a severe form of autism, one that caused doctors to originally predict he'd never be able to speak. T.J. and his family give Special Olympics much of the credit for his ability to overcome these hardships.

"Competing has helped give me a sense of belonging," says T.J., a tall, lanky teenager with short brown hair. He's looking forward to the Special Olympics Colorado, which will take over Copper Mountain Resort March 5–6. He's been training for months to compete in 300- and 500-meter snowshoeing races.

For T.J. and other athletes, these State Winter Games are the year's highlight, and it's more than just a competition. The athletes love the camaraderie and build countless friendships over their years of participating.

The late Eunice Kennedy Shriver founded the Special Olympics in 1968; her son, Tim Shriver, took over in 1996. It offers athletes with intellectual disabilities sports training and athletic competition throughout the year — plus the chance to compete in summer and winter games on either a state or national level. For the State Winter Games in Colorado, the docket includes figure skating, speed skating, alpine skiing, cross-country skiing, snowboarding, and snowshoeing.

T.J. is excited. He is the local equivalent to Shaun White in his sport, claiming the title of undefeated state snowshoe champion for the past seven seasons, boasts his proud mom and coach Tina. T.J.'s father, Jim, helps with the coaching as well, and the family started training in January with a mix of long-distance hikes and short sprints. On non-snowshoeing days, T.J. lifts weights, downhill skis, and plays lacrosse.

It all helps his development. "It stimulates my brain to function properly," he says, an affirmation his mother backs. "We think it's all the exercises and the body going through

these functions that got his whole brain connected," Tina says.

Five hundred athletes with stories similar to T.J.'s compete in the State Winter Games. Participation is determined by attitude, effort, and attendance — then random selection. Because nearly 10,000 Special Olympics athletes reside in Colorado, selection is a huge honor. This is the 23rd year Copper Mountain Resort has hosted the two-day competition, which includes opening ceremonies, fireworks, social events, a torch parade down the mountain, and a lighting ceremony.

These athletes love the competition — and the awards ceremony that comes with doing well. This all adds up to something that has hooked these athletes for life.

"Competing in Special Olympics has helped me become the person I am today in many ways," T.J. says. "I look forward to continuing to participate in Special Olympics competitions as an athlete throughout my later years." ☐

Melissa Taylor is a freelance writer, award-winning blogger, and educator.

Tim Shriver Connects with Special Olympics Global Ambassadors in Denver

Casually dressed in khakis and a button-down shirt, Timothy P. Shriver smiles and sits on a chair in the middle of a brightly lit banquet room filled with his biggest fans.

"Hi, I'm Tim," says the unassuming CEO of Special Olympics during a casual October 2010 gathering of Special Olympics teenagers at the Denver Grand Hyatt. These kids, called Global Messengers, volunteer in the Project Unify program to spread the Special Olympics message of respect, acceptance, inclusion, and human dignity for people with intellectual disabilities.

"Our generation didn't get it done," Shriver tells the group. "You think you're supposed to look up to your parents, but we look up to you. People say you're the future. I say you're the present, the right now. You're changing your schools."

This event proves two things: Shriver is made for this job (which he took over from his mother, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, in 1996), and the Special Olympics are much more than athletics.

Shriver listens as each person shares his or her story. Sixteen-year-old Sarah Barnhart tells Shriver how she and her brother, Ben, a dark-haired, 15-year-old athlete with a brain dysfunction, asked Cherry Creek High School and Campus Middle School students to sign a "stop using the r-word" pledge. (They'll ask again at both schools March 2 on worldwide "Spread the Word to End the Word" day; visit r-word.org for information.)

The Global Messenger program also builds some serious self-esteem among these athletes. "I'm Vincent, and I've been doing Special Olympics for six-and-a-half years. I got to go to Nebraska and give a speech to 500 people," says one proud kid.

"Could you give it to me because I have to do a speech tonight?" Shriver says. Vincent beams, and the whole group laughs. It's this type of interaction that highlights this work as Shriver's calling.

When everyone has had a chance to speak and photos and goodbyes are complete, Shriver walks to his next stop, the "Be Beautiful, Be Yourself" Jet Set Fashion Show, where he received an award for his work championing the rights of these athletes.

"I see my role as finding the best ideas," he says. "I don't care how much staff Special Olympics Colorado has, there is no way they can do what these kids can do. For me, it was always about getting the young people involved as leaders. That's one of the great things my mother did. She made people believe they could be the agents of change." — MT

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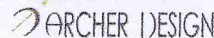
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