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FEATURED TOP STORY

Coaches, athletes gather for Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games opening ceremony (WATCH VIDEO)

By David Hurst
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Athletes and coaches gather at Festival Plaza at Seven Springs Mountain Resort on Sunday, Jan. 29, 2017, for the 40th annual Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games opening ceremony and to watch fireworks at the conclusion of the event.



The cauldron is lit.

For a group of more than 300 Special Olympics Pennsylvania athletes like Andy Sambol, of Somerset, that can only mean one thing: the Winter Games are underway.

Hundreds of winter athletes and 135 coaches from four states – most from Pennsylvania – gathered Sunday night at Seven Springs Mountain Resort for the games' opening ceremonies.

"The next two days will be full of fun competition in some very challenging winter sports that will be exciting for competitors and spectators alike," said Tim Spence, a Butler County athlete who served as a global messenger and co-emcee for the event.

Groups from 24 Pennsylvania counties as well as three neighboring states – Delaware, Maryland and Virginia – are competing in this year's games.

This was the third consecutive year the event has been held at Seven Springs.

It was Special Olympics Pennsylvania's 40th overall.

"What a perfect place for our games," the organization's board chairman, John Verbanic, said.

Athletes, including ones from Cambria, Somerset, Indiana and Blair counties, will compete in events like alpine and cross-country skiing, showshoeing and speed skating.

Tyrone-area skater David Persing said he was excited and confident about his chances at this week's games.

But he said the opportunity to spend time with fellow athletes is what makes the games truly special.

"Just having fun and being with the other athletes ... it's great," he said.

Sambol agreed.

He's been cross-country skiing in the winter games for 25 years, but it still brought a smile to his face Sunday night.

"It's great camaraderie," Sambol said. "Instead of just fierce competition, it's a lot of fun."

David Hurst is a reporter for The Tribune-Democrat. He can be reached at (814) 532-5053. Follow him on Twitter @TDDavidHurst and Instagram @TDDavidHurst.



Competitors, coaches returning to Johnstown area for Special Olympics Winter Games



Editorial | Determination, drive are traits of Special Olympians