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Editorial | Cheer on Special Olympians

The Tribune-Democrat 4 hrs ago



Robert Rager of Cambria County works his way down the entry level Alpine Giant Slalom run during the Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games on Monday, Jan. 30, 2017, at Seven Springs Mountain Resort.

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Hundreds of athletes will descend on the Laurel Highlands next week.

Although they aren't the names you read about daily in this newspaper or see on highlight shows, you will find them just as determined and even more inspiring.

It is estimated that 350 athletes as well as 175 coaches and more than 1,000 volunteers will take part in the 2018 Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games at Seven Springs Mountain Resort and Greensburg.

According to its website, the "mission of Special Olympics is to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities. This gives them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community."

The athletes will represent more than 20 Pennsylvania counties as well as Delaware, Maryland and Virginia.

This will mark the 41st year for the Winter Games and fourth consecutive year that Seven Springs has hosted events.

"The staff at Seven Springs is out of this world and their accommodations to everything we do is amazing," said Mike Ermer, SOPA's competition director for the western region.

"I hear stories from their staff that the interaction they have with athletes is something they talk about all year, so that's the kind of impact our athletes have on people."

Opening ceremonies will be held at 7 p.m. Sunday at the resort's Festival Park.

The event will include speakers, performances and fireworks, as well as the official lighting of the Olympic torch.

Competition will run Sunday through Tuesday.

Seven Springs will host alpine skiing, cross-country skiing and showshoeing. Speed skating will be held at Kirk Nevin Arena in Greensburg.

Figure skating will take place as a standalone event March 10 in York.

The much-anticipated Victory Dance will be held at 7 p.m. Monday, bringing athletes, coaches and organizers together for camaraderie.

The closing ceremonies will be held from 12:30 to 3 p.m. Tuesday at each venue.

The Winter Games also will host a Healthy Athletes program, which will include free dental, podiatry and vision screenings.

"We want the athletes to have fun, be safe, do their best and enjoy the experience," Ermer said.

Participants train year-round with the goal of achieving a medal.

Consider visiting the venues next week to support and cheer on these athletes.

We are certain you'll be inspired by their determination and joy.

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