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FEATURED

Going for gold: Skiers take to the slopes at Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games (WATCH VIDEO)

By Kelly Urban
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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.



SEVEN SPRINGS – With snow falling and the sun shining, you couldn't have asked for a better day on the mountain.

As Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games began Monday, 300 athletes competing in alpine skiing, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing took to the slopes at Seven Springs Mountain Resort in hopes of winning gold medals.

John Reynolds, of Johnstown, has been skiing for seven years as part of the Cambria County team.

"I look forward to the skiing and the medals," he said. "It's a lot of fun, but you have to practice."

The Cambria County team does just that on Sundays at Hidden Valley Four Seasons Resort in preparation for the Winter Games.

Chelsea Drob, director of programming projects for Special Olympics Pennsylvania, said her hope is that when athletes come to compete, they'll perform at their best.

"Going back to the athlete oath, 'Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt,' so no matter the outcome that they are a good sport," she said. "These games are everything to the athletes. It's not only about the competition, it's an opportunity for athletes to come together from all over the state and do what they love and celebrate what they love."

Kristine Stout, an alpine skier competing from Chester County, said participating in the games makes her determined to succeed.

"They make me feel confident in myself, which I'm usually not," she said. "When I'm on the slopes, I'm more confident."

She said just being able to compete is her favorite part of the games.

"I do like getting medals," she said. "I like competing with other counties and making new friends."

Alpine skier Jordan Reedy said it's her third year competing in the Winter Games, and she skis at the intermediate level.

"I like going down the hills," the Chester County resident said. "I also like coming here and seeing everyone."

Her favorite part of the games is the medal ceremony.

"I keep all my medals in the basement hanging on the walls," Reedy said.

Volunteers are a big part of the games, with an estimated 1,200 people working to make sure the events go off without a hitch.

Jacqi Knox, a senior at Rockwood Area Junior/Senior High School, has been a volunteer for five years.

"I love volunteering and have been working with Montgomery County for the past five years," she said. "It's nice to see the same people and help them every year."

Knox said it's heartwarming to see the athletes competing and performing well.

"Everyone is cheering them on, and they're really happy," she said. "The joy of seeing them so happy makes all this worth it. This is such a great experience – you meet a lot of people and you make new friends ... it's a lot of fun."

In addition, the Winter Games hosts the Healthy Athletes program where wellness promotions and hearing and dental screenings are offered.

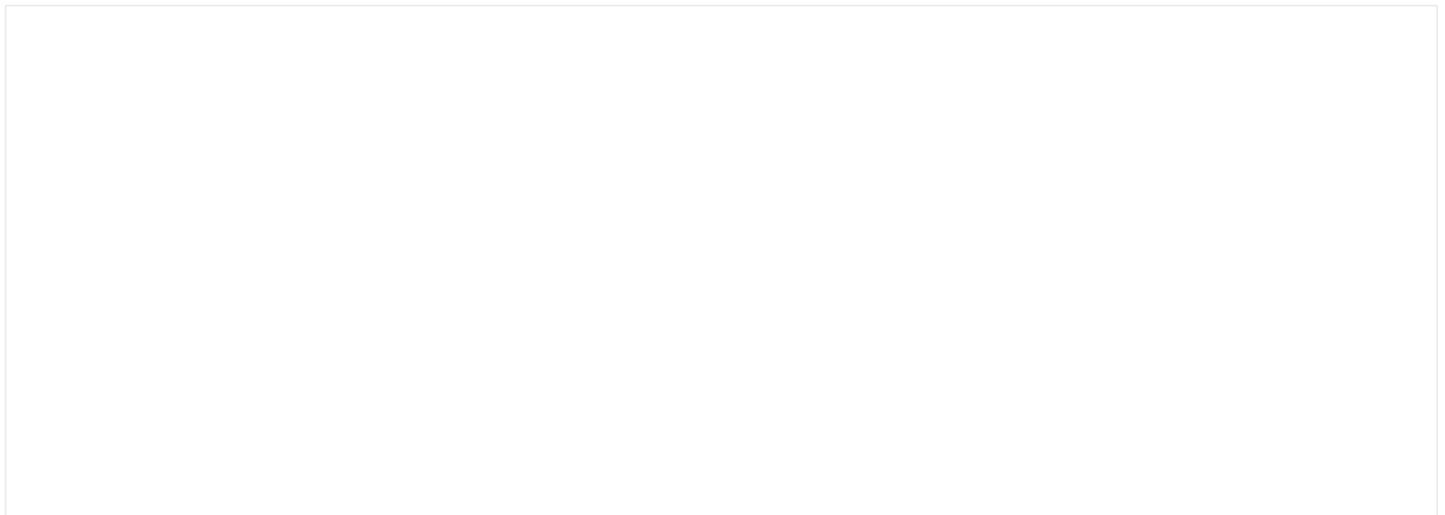
The program provides health services and education to athletes free of charge and is changing the way health systems interact with people with intellectual disabilities.

"We always say to be an athlete and perform at your best you need to be fit and healthy, so we're providing them with information on how to live a healthier lifestyle," Knox said.

Speed skating events also were held at Kirk Nevin Arena in Greensburg, Westmoreland County.

Following competition Tuesday, the games will wrap up with closing ceremonies at each site.

Kelly Urban is a reporter for The Tribune-Democrat. She can be reached at (814) 532-5073. Follow her on Twitter @KellyUrban25.





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



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