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Special Olympics athletes, volunteers pleased despite 'touchy' weather

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Elliott Galebach, of Lancaster County, left, is shown next to Debra Dempsey, of New Canonsburg, who celebrates winning three gold medals in advanced slalom Alpine skiing, Galebach earned three bronze medals. Tuesday, January 31, 2017.



SEVEN SPRINGS – Athletes and coaches clapped and cheered for their teammates Tuesday afternoon during an awards ceremony at Seven Springs Mountain Resort, marking the conclusion of the 40th annual Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games.

Mike Ermer, the Western Region competition director for Special Olympics Pennsylvania, said he's "very satisfied" with how this year's edition of the annual classic went – even though this year's weather was "a little bit touchy."

The Winter Games' speed skating events were held at Kirk Nevin Arena in Greensburg, Westmoreland County, and Monday's heavy snow made getting the athletes' buses from Seven Springs to Greensburg an uncertain proposition, Ermer said.

But Winter Games staff overcame all the obstacles in their paths, allowing the event to go on without a hitch.

"While (winter weather) offers some challenges, I've got an amazing committee, made up of volunteers. We've been doing this for a long time, and they do a great job of being able to adjust on the fly ... to react to the weather conditions, to make sure our athletes are safe, to make sure they have an opportunity to compete," Ermer said.

Ermer said he's pleased with how the past few Winter Games have gone – and added that Seven Springs' facilities and personnel are a big part of the reason why.

"Ever since we've come to Seven Springs, the facilities here – everybody from the ski patrol, to the dining hall, to the 'go team' that sets everything up – they've been incredible. I really like the direction the event's going in," he said.

Jack Kemery, who helped coach a team of Chester County athletes, complimented Seven Springs and the event organizers for the way they handled the week's weather-related complications.

"Considering all the weather problems on Monday, they handled it extremely well, as they always do," Kemery said.

Kemery also praised the waitstaff, the cooks and the rest of the staff at Seven Springs – which has hosted Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games for the past three years – for how successfully they made participating athletes and coaches feel welcome.

"There's accepting, and then there's embracing. We're embraced here," Kemery said.

Ashley Swint, one of Kemery's athletes, agreed.

"It's my first time up here, and I had a great time. Hopefully I'll be back next year," Swint, who took home bronze and silver medals in downhill skiing events, said.

For competitors like Swint and alpine skier Kristine Stout, the weather presented an entirely different set of challenges.

"The (snow on the) first day was terrible, but today it was nice and smooth," Stout, from Chester County, said.

Downhill skier Jahleel Faust, also from Chester County, agreed with Stout's assessment.

"I thought the event went pretty well, but the weather was kind of choppy," Faust, who participated in his eighth Winter Games this year, said. "At first, most of (the snow) was powder, which stinks for downhill (skiing), but it got better as people packed it down."

Swint, Stout, Faust and 350 other athletes from 24 Pennsylvania counties and three neighboring states participated in three days of winter sports – including alpine skiing, cross-country skiing, speed skating, snowshoeing and individual skills events – during the Winter Games.

Kemery, who has coached teams of Special Olympics athletes for more than 25 years, said he sees firsthand the "very tangible" benefits the games have on the members of his teams.

"They always have a great time. It gives them a chance to get a sense of confidence, of camaraderie, a chance for socialization. The Special Olympics really does benefit these citizens – it helps them be all they can be," he said.

Nevertheless, competition remains at the core of the event, Kemery believes.

"This is social, but it also brings the idea of sport into these athletes' lives – winning sometimes, failing sometimes, then getting back up and winning again," he said.

"There's so much more to (the Special Olympics) than people who don't participate in them realize," Kemery added.

"It's not a facade. It's real. It's not just one of these feel-good things where everyone gets a trophy – they're not bending the rules. A (disqualification) is a (disqualification). The courses are the same courses you'd see in a high school or college competition."

Ermer said plans are in the works for next year's Winter Games.

"We've got a couple ideas for some minor tweaks and adjustments we're going to make. I don't think there's anything drastic we need to do – just some minor tweaks and improvements," Ermer said.

"We keep reaching for that perfect event. It's out there somewhere ... Winter Games has really evolved a lot in the past couple years. I'm happy with the direction it's going, and I'm really looking forward to next year."

A full list of Winter Games medalists will be published on the Special Olympics Pennsylvania website, www.specialolympicspa.org, later this week, Ermer said.

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