



Healthy Body Equals Healthy Mind

Brittany Thayer, Bethlehem City Athlete Leader



Hi everyone, my name is Brittany Thayer. I participate with Bethlehem City, which is a part of the Greater Lehigh Valley Pocono Region. I'd like to share a story of my experience this year during the coronavirus pandemic. I know it hasn't been easy for any of us & it was hard for me at first, but what helped me to get through it all is participating in these SOPA Commit to Fit activities. I generally don't need too much motivation to keep myself active, however I wanted to have it rub off on some of my other fellow athletes. That is why whenever given the choice, I always tried to partner up with at least one other athlete, volunteer, close friend or family member.

The support from my friends, family and even my beagle, Buddy, has been so amazing. It has given me more confidence and energy to increase my level of fitness by going out on longer walks each day. Eventually, those long walks turned into runs. After being physically active, when my body needed a break from all that exercising, I got to interact on Zoom sessions with fellow athletes from all over the state. Seeing the faces of people I don't get to see too often has helped me get through all the negativity and boredom of being stuck at home. While my parents have helped me stay mentally active as well as physically active, being with my SOPA family has gone a long way. As an Athlete Leader, I was able to take the next step needed as a Global Messenger by completing Global Messenger II as well as becoming an Athlete Representative.

Like anyone else during this pandemic, I've had my good days and my bad days. However, one thing we all can control is our attitude. I made a choice to stay calm and think positive and it has paid off. The best thing that has happened to me has been that I've been able to stay busy and keep myself distracted with everything SOPA has had to offer on a virtual platform. My attitude has since rubbed off onto my fellow athletes and it has created a domino effect. I have been doing everything possible to keep myself and my family safe from getting COVID and hope everyone else is doing the same thing. I'm thankful that I have been able to stay healthy and I know that there's only one way we're able to fully get through this pandemic and that is staying positive together!

Brittany Thayer is an Athlete Representative, Global Messenger and Health and Fitness Coordinator from Bethlehem City and has been participating in Special Olympics for over 20 years. Brittany graduated from Athlete Leadership University with a degree in health in 2018 and will be earning her 2nd in communications later in 2021.

Moving On Up

Zachary Williams, Regional Input Council Vice-Chair Elect



My name is Zachary Williams. I am an athlete for Washington/Greene Counties. I have been an athlete for over 25 years. I participate in several sports including aquatics, basketball, bocce, bowling flag football, floor hockey, and long-distance running/walking.

I have completed almost every single Athlete Leadership University course and have earned degrees in Governance, Communications, and Health. I have also instructed Global Messenger training where I got to share everything I've learned with my peers. During the 2016 Athlete Congress, I was elected by my peers as the Southwestern Representative of the Regional Input Council (RIC). During last year's Athlete Congress, I was then elected as the next Vice-Chair of the Regional Input Council. Additionally, I was the 2018 Pittsburgh Polar Plunge Ambassador, where I helped spread the word on the event across the region to get more people to donate and take the Plunge. When I haven't been able to compete, I have had the pleasure of being a volunteer at

several state events including State Games, Fall Festival, Winter Games, and Western Spring and Fall Sectionals. Most recently, I helped Washington/Greene Counties start an Athlete Leadership Team where I serve as the co-chair.

I am grateful for the many opportunities that being involved in Athlete Leadership has made possible. I have made many new friends across PA. I encourage athletes to share their ideas and concerns, so that I can pass on their input. I really like the opportunity to listen to my fellow athletes and share their information with the Local Management Team.

I take my leadership roles very seriously and strive to be a good example for athletes and Special Olympics PA. It's really important that Athlete Leaders not only share their experiences and provide feedback, but also take action with the support of other athletes, volunteers and staff members.

I really love being part of the Special Olympics PA family. I look forward to serving in my leadership roles for many years to come. Let's all hope for a better year in 2021.

Zachary Williams is the Vice-Chair Elect of the Regional Input Council and will begin his term later this year. Zachary has been participating in Special Olympics for over 25 years and is currently one of seven Athlete Leaders to have earned three degrees from Athlete Leadership University. Outside of Special Olympics, Zachary enjoys watching the Pittsburgh Pirates, Steelers and WWE.

Seeing More Than What There Is

Hillary McFadden, Area M Global Messenger



Hi, my name is Hillary McFadden and I'm a speed skater from Area M. About 20 years ago, I first found out about Special Olympics when I was in high school. As soon as I heard that Special Olympics offered speed skating, I immediately wanted to give it a try. Even though I'm blind, I wanted to try speed skating because I have rollerbladed on my own several times before.

I remember being at my first Winter Games, in addition to hearing a lot of people cheering, I also remembered the thrill of carrying the banner in at Opening Ceremonies and winning my first gold

medal! I still remember how it felt knowing a lot of people were watching me skate and how it felt knowing I finished first.

As I mentioned, I am blind, so it still can be difficult at times. However, I've been fortunate to have a coach guiding me around while I'm skating. I want other blind people to know that they are just as capable in succeeding in speed skating or any sport. I recently got trained as a Global Messenger because I want to be able to tell blind people and anyone else with physical impairments that the sky is the limit and you can accomplish anything you put your mind towards if you keep your head up high and fight for what you want.

I'm looking forward to being able to share my story with more people and inspire others!

Hillary McFadden is a Global Messenger from Area M and has been participating in Special Olympics for 20 years. Outside of Special Olympics, Hillary enjoys playing the guitar, keyboard and singing and also has an identical twin.

An Exciting Return

Michael Schroder, Area M Athlete



I wanted to share my memories of my return to the Special Olympics competition for the 1st time since the end of the 2005-06 academic school year. I wanted to continue my Special Olympics journey after high school. However, I decided to retire to focus on my college studies and the numerous jobs I have taken over the years. Hence, I had to step away from Special Olympics until the time was right for me to return.

At the same time, I was competing in a semi-professional football career over the last 3 years with 2 years playing for the Harrisburg Sharks in the spring and the East Penn Raiders in the summer.

Last year, I was fortunate to get an interview with WHTM's Damon Turbitt for a story about competing in semi-pro football with Autism. After having that interview, I wanted to return to Special Olympics for alpine skiing. After my trip to Orlando with the Raiders for a national football championship was over, I made the decision to come back, because I really missed the energy and competition.

There were many differences between the last time I put on a pair of skies in 2006 compared to today. There were some familiar faces both athletes and coaches and a lot of new faces. It did take a little while to get the hang of things, but once I got going, there was no stopping me. And to make it to states on the 1st year back was incredible. However, states were different in 2006 when going to Hidden Valley for skiing compared to Seven Springs today. It was nice that you didn't have to travel from Johnstown to get to the resort. You just stay at the resort and can be on the slopes in minutes. Additionally, to get all golds on the 1st try back was an accomplishment that I will never forget. Hopefully this will be a springboard towards World games in 2025.

It goes to show that age is just a number and the skies the limit on what you can accomplish. I also would like to thank my employer for allowing me to compete again. One of the things I'm most grateful for is that my employer has given me time off to compete where not only can I aim to add onto my athletic accomplishments, but enjoy the many other great things that comes with Special Olympics.

Michael Schroeder is an athlete from Area M and had participated in Special Olympics for 13 years prior to returning at the beginning of last year. Outside of Special Olympics, Michael enjoys his job working at Panera.

Get There Any Way Possible

Jordan Schubert, Special Olympics Pennsylvania MGR. of Athlete Leadership & Young Athletes



Ever since I became old enough to be selected, like many other athletes, my biggest goal more than anything has been to be elected to compete at USA Games. While that hasn't happened yet, I feel the same excitement I felt 4 years ago thinking that with a gold medal and a little bit of luck, my basketball team and I would be have the chance of a lifetime.

That did not happen last time either, but that didn't mean we weren't motivated to try again in 2021. Unfortunately, we weren't able to play basketball as a team last year because of the pandemic and as I write this, I'm not entirely sure what we will be able to do in the spring of 2021.

What I did find out last fall was that regardless of what might happen this year, all athletes and teams that won a gold medal in any of the sports allocated for the 2022 USA Games at the

2018 and/or 2019 Summer Games and Fall Festival will also be in the drawing. Good news for my team, if you read SOAR on a regular basis, you'll remember back in 2018 we went undefeated. However, there was a catch.

One of the things SOPA had really been working on was asides from improving the quality of virtual sports programming at home, was also creating a challenging, but fun competition opportunity that any athlete can be a part of. That then became the Fitness Heptathlon. One of the first things I found out with the Fitness Heptathlon was that every athlete eligible to be drawn for the 2022 USA Games had to participate in it and/or another Commit to Fit activity. I was worried for a little bit if the rest of my team would be willing/able to register, however thanks to the efforts of my coaches, Tony Carney and Denise Montgomery, as well as Chester County Manager, Angie Robinson, my entire team registered.

Personally, USA Games was my primary motivation towards registering for the Fitness Heptathlon. However, just like in any sports related activity, the thing I've gotten more and more engaged in has been finding ways to slowly and improve my scores. There have been days that I just didn't feel like doing any of the exercises, however I pushed through and while I've had mixed success each week, it gives me something to aim for, which I really missed badly throughout last year.

I'm thankful I chose to participate in the Fitness Heptathlon because regardless of who gets selected to compete in Orlando, they will be in even better physical and mental shape.

Jordan Schubert is the Manager of Athlete Leadership & Young Athletes for Special Olympics Pennsylvania and has been participating in Special Olympics for 16 years. Jordan is also a proud graduate of West Chester University.

2020 Virtual Fall Sectional and Festival Athlete Input Survey Results

In October, 2020, Special Olympics Pennsylvania hosted the Virtual Fall Sectional and in November, the Virtual Fall Festival. With virtual competitions being a new concept, Athlete Input Surveys were especially important for these events.

Athlete Input Survey Grading Formula:

- Percentage of responses answering "excellent" plus half the percentage of responses answering "average".
 - Example: 80% Excellent + 20% Average \div 2 = 90% (A-)

Virtual Fall Sectional-100 Responses

1. Have you competed at Fall Sectionals in-person?
 - a. Yes, I compete every year, if not, at least 3 times in the last 5 years-48%
 - b. Yes, however I have only competed once or twice in the last 5 years-15%
 - c. Yes, however I have not competed in more than 5 years-3%
 - d. I have not competed at Fall Sectionals-34%
2. What sport did you train in for the Virtual Fall Sectional?
 - a. Bocce-26%
 - b. Flag Football-3%
 - c. Long Distance Running/Walking-23%
 - d. Powerlifting-3%
 - e. Soccer-24%
 - f. Volleyball-21%
3. Where did your training take place?
 - a. In-Person-35%
 - b. At-Home-65%
4. If you did train at home, what difficulties, if any, did you have without your coaches' direct support:
 - a. Much less motivating without all my friends around me.
 - b. I didn't have someone to critique me on what I could improve upon.
 - c. My coach and I talked regularly, but they weren't there to push me to my limits.
 - d. It's impossible to learn sports over the internet.
 - e. Some skills were difficult to learn without the 1 on 1 support (soccer).
5. Promotion of Event via SOPA Website and Social Media:
 - a. 67% Excellent + 29% Average \div 2 = 82% (B-)
 - i. 3 athletes answered "Poor"
 1. Difficult to find without social media.
6. Opening Ceremonies:
 - a. 65% Excellent + 28% Average \div 2 = 79% (C+)
 - i. 4 athletes answered "Poor"
 1. Stream kept freezing.
 2. Too short.
7. Awards Ceremonies
 - a. 76% Excellent + 18% Average \div 2 = 85% (B)
 - i. 3 athletes answered "Poor"
 1. Would help if everyone was automatically muted.
 2. Too confusing.
 3. Not everyone that participated showed up.

8. Additional Online Content (Olympic Village, Competition Highlights, Block Party, etc.)
 - a. 69% Excellent + 27% Average ÷ 2 = 83% (B)
 - i. 2 athletes answered "Poor"
 1. Got bored staring at my screen.
 2. Block Party kept freezing

Overall Grade:

82% (B-)

Additional Comments:

- Thank you!
- Pet show was great!
- Can links to awards ceremonies be e-mailed?

Virtual Fall Festival-144 Responses

1. Have you competed at Fall Festival in person?
 - a. Yes, I compete every year, if not, at least 3 times in the last 5 years-53%
 - b. Yes, however I have only competed once or twice in the last 5 years-15%
 - c. Yes, however I have not competed in more than 5 years-7%
 - d. I have not competed at Fall Festival-25%
2. What sport did you train in for Virtual Fall Festival?
 - a. Bocce-24%
 - b. Flag Football-5%
 - c. Long Distance Running/Walking-23%
 - d. Powerlifting-6%
 - e. Roller Skating-1%
 - f. Soccer-28%
 - g. Volleyball-13%
3. Where did your training take place?
 - a. In-Person-26%
 - b. At-Home-74%
4. If you did train at home, what difficulties, if any, did you have without your coaches' direct support:
 - a. Some of the videos were confusing (soccer).
 - b. My coaches did a great job supporting us (bocce).
 - c. It was difficult at first, but eventually became real easy (soccer).
5. Promotion of Event via SOPA Website and Social Media:
 - a. 72% Excellent + 24% Average ÷ 2 = 84% (B)
 - i. 4 athletes answered "Poor"
 1. Local Programs can do a better job promoting.
 2. Better instructions for athletes that aren't tech savvy.
6. Opening Ceremonies:
 - a. 81% Excellent + 18% Average ÷ 2 = 90% (A-)
 - i. 1 athlete answered "Poor"
 1. Couldn't find information until afterwards.
7. Closing Ceremonies:
 - a. 72% Excellent + 27% Average ÷ 2 = 86% (B)
 - i. 1 athlete answered "Poor"

1. Couldn't find information until afterwards.
8. Awards Ceremonies
 - a. 65% Excellent + 27% Average ÷ 2= 79% (C+)
 - i. 7 athletes answered "Poor"
 1. Called names too quickly, didn't mention Local Programs.
 2. Add cheering sounds.
 3. It was confusing to follow.
 4. My name wasn't called during soccer ceremony.
 5. Didn't have slide with names and medals like they did for Sectionals.
9. Additional Online Content (Olympic Village, Competition Highlights, Victory Dance, Healthy Athletes, Healthy Habits, etc.)
 - a. 77% Excellent + 22% Average ÷ 2= 88% (B+)
 - i. 1 athlete answered "Poor"
 1. I was not let into Trivia

Overall Grade:

85% (B)

From Senior Competition Director, Bruce Bach:

Thank you athletes for your willingness to participate in the Virtual Competition Survey. Your feedback is valuable in helping us to plan for our upcoming events. We have reviewed the survey feedback as a team and will also review it with the Winter Games GOC's. Additionally, we share this information with all of our GOC's in order to continue to make improvements to the athlete experience.

You are also always welcome to share your feedback with me at bbach@specialolympicspa.org.

Yours In Sport,
Bruce

Athlete Recognition

SOAR would like to congratulate the following athletes that received awards during the 2020 Virtual Annual Awards Ceremony and Athlete Leadership University Class of 2020:

Female Athlete of the Year-Carole Ann Bollinger, Adams County.

Male Athlete of the Year-James Alexander, Allegheny County.

Athlete Leader of the Year-Zachary Hicks, Area M.

Unified Athlete of the Year-Kristine Stout, Chester County.

Athlete Leadership University Class of 2020-

- Ashley Bressler, Columbia/Montour Counties, Athlete Representative.
- Winnie Downey, Delaware County, Athlete Representative.
- Anthony Glose, Lehigh County, Athletes as Coaches.
- Andrew Mayer, Washington/Greene Counties, Athlete Representative and Athletes as Coaches.
- Elizabeth Porter, Bradford/Sullivan Counties, Athlete Representative.
- Kristine Progin, Lebanon County, Global Messenger.
- Ernest Roundtree, Monroe County, Athlete as Coach.
- Kelly Unangst, Delaware County, Global Messenger.

Important Notices

Jordan Schubert, Manager of Athlete Leadership & Young Athletes

2020 Athlete Congress Report Out:

The full 2020 Athlete Congress Report Out that was presented during SOPA's Leadership Conference can be seen right [here](#). Once the analysis of the Athlete Congress Priority Feedback is approved by President & CEO, Matt Aaron, it will then be shared with the appropriate SOPA staff asking if they are willing/able to implement the feedback provided. A final update is currently anticipated to be presented to the Board of Directors in June, 2021 and then shared more broadly.

2021 Athlete Leadership University Update:

All Athlete Leaders that have completed the Athlete Representative I and/or Global Messenger I course and practicum, as well as their Mentors, will be receiving a survey asking for their availability in helping SOPA determine when to host a Virtual Athlete Representative II and Global Messenger II session this spring/summer.

Once it's safe to resume in-person activities with little/no restrictions, SOPA also hopes to offer one session offering Athlete Representative I and Global Messenger I and another session offering Athletes as Coaches and Healthy Lifestyles sometime between July-November. To learn more about Athlete Leadership University and the different Athlete Leadership roles, check out the new [Athlete Leadership Roles and Trainings](#) handout and fill in the [Athlete Leadership University Interest Form!](#)

Athlete Leadership Facebook Group:

Are you on Facebook and want to communicate more with your fellow athletes? Send a friend request to Jelsea Schrob to be added to SOPA's Athlete Leadership Facebook group. This group is a great way to interact with athletes, as well as receive the most up to date Athlete Leadership information. If you're not on Facebook, creating an account is quick, easy and free!

Email Address Update: I would like to be able to reach as many athletes as possible. If you haven't received any emails from me, or your email address has changed in the last year, please email me at jschubert@specialolympicspa.org.

Share Your Story: If you would like to share a story any Special Olympics experience, please e-mail me at jschubert@specialolympicspa.org by March 31st for a chance to have your story shared in Winter, 2021 Edition of SOAR. If you have submitted a story within the last year, before writing another story, I ask that you instead encourage your peers to share a story about their Special Olympics experiences so we can feature more athletes! You are then welcome to submit stories yourself for the Summer, 2021 or End of 2021 Edition of SOAR!