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FEATURED

Special Olympics bring people together as athletes, friends

By Kelly Urban
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Carlos Stoltz, of Montgomery County, reacts as his name is called for his turn at the alpine skiing event during the Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games held at Seven Springs Mountain Resort in Champion, Pa. on Monday, January 29, 2018.

Thomas Slusser

CHAMPION – There’s only one thing that goes through Dean Prowell’s mind when he steps into the starting gate prior to his alpine skiing race.

“You gotta go fast, you gotta go fast,” the York County athlete said Monday after completing a run.

“This is relaxing for me. You get to strap some boards on your feet and go down a hill.”

As Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games kicked

off Monday, 350 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.

“Each year I look forward to spending times with all my friends – the competition is fun, too – but it’s the friends that really make it for me,” Prowell said.

Mike Ermer, SOPA’s competition director for the western region, said the Winter Games is the culmination of what the athletes train for throughout the winter season.

“So many of our athletes train year round in various sports, so the Winter Games are another way for them to stay active and stay fit and come out and see their friends,” he said. “The athletes are battling to do their best and they want to get that gold medal. They get frustrated if they fall a little short, but they get up and dust themselves off and know they have to keep working hard and try again.”

Ben Meyes, an alpine skier from Lehigh County, said he’s been skiing for over 25 years and he enjoys the camaraderie of the sport.

“I like meeting new people and making friends,” he said.

Meyes said his technique is to take his time and think through each run.

“I want to hit all my gates,” Meyes said. “I am out to win.”

Alpine skier Marissa Malaska said she’s been skiing since she was a young girl.

“One of my teachers got me into it and I really liked it,” the Lehigh County athlete said. “I love everything about it.”

Malaska said her focus is bringing the gold home.

“I also love cheering for everyone else to win the gold medal,” she said. “I look forward to this every year and it’s a lot of fun.”

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.

Lucas Rashilla, a junior at Ligonier Valley High School, was volunteering for the first time.

“I thought it would be nice to come out and see what it’s like,” he said. “It’s been pretty good and the athletes are all ready to go. It’s good to see them having fun.”

He said he was enjoying the experience of interacting with the athletes and other volunteers.

“The athletes are really excited and nervous at first, but it’s fun to be able to encourage them and watch them go down,” Rashilla said. “I’d tell others don’t be afraid to volunteer because it’s a great experience, so there’s no reason not to.”

In addition, the Winter Games hosts the Healthy Athletes program where healthy promotions, foot examinations 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 want the athletes to do their best and also challenge themselves to get out of their comfort zone,” Ermer said. “We hope they have a positive experience. Everyone here just has a smile on their face and they look forward to the games; it’s great.”

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

Following competition on 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](#).



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