2014 January 22   Special Olympics Sunshine Coast by Micheal Oswald

Hello Sports Fans. Welcome to another peek into a terrific season of Special Olympics on the Sunshine Coast.

Swimming and basketball are going quite well. A guest coach came for swimming practice recently and did a remarkable job on teaching the breaststroke. I am happy to say that even me, who has had lots of trouble with that particular stroke has improved immensely.

By the time you read this, we will have been to our one swim meet this season on February 23rd at UBC. All participants are looking forward to this event, especially those who went to Provincials last year.

Head Coach Marilyn Adams summed up the season:

“Special Olympics swimming on the Sunshine Coast started in mid October, had a break for Christmas and restarted the 8th of January. The swimmers were happy to hear that they are invited to a swim meet at UBC on February 23. All are training hard to be ready to give it their all. Also training hard is Christel Jensen, our Nationals qualifier. Christel won 4 medals at the SO Provincial Games last July and has been chosen to be on team BC. Her mandate is to swim 3 times a week and work out in the gym 3 times a week. Christel also works so she is very busy these days.”

In basketball news, not enough teams signed up for a tournament here on the Coast, so there will not be a tourney at Elphinstone Secondary this year. However, plans for the rest of this season include a ‘Coaches vs. Athletes’ game and at the final practice, a gathering of both teams from Gibsons and Sechelt for a fun night of games. That may include what is called a ‘hat game’ where all the names from both teams are drawn from a hat to form the teams that then play. Sounds fun to me!

Before that, however, there was another event. On Thursday, January 30th the Gibsons and Sechelt basketball teams met at Sechelt Elementary Gym for a friendly game. Both sides showed incredible skill with shooting, passing and getting rebounds. There were many fans there and a lot of cheering. There was even a “Dream Team” game where certain players from each team met for a five-minute scrimmage; all had a lot of fun and I’m sure everyone worked up a sweat.

The curling team went to a bonspiel in Abbotsford on Saturday, January 10th. Our team played three games over a two-day period – winning one, being shut out in the second and coming close in the third. They were up against some pretty stiff competition but they enjoyed their stay at the Super 8 motel and the well-played games. However, everyone agreed that the highlight of the trip was the two birthday celebrations at the Old Spaghetti Factory. Michael Brooks, curling athlete turned the mighty 19 years of age and Bill Climie, SOSC Curling Coach, turned 75+.

On Tuesday, January 28th I went to watch a floor hockey game between local RCMP and the SOSC team The Bears. The five guests that played so well with the athletes were, Cst. Kevin Shepherd, Cst. Tracey Dubnyk, Cst. Glen Martin, Cst. David Yuan and Cpl. Colby Attlesey.

The game was played extremely well with many spectators on hand to cheer on the players. Each of the five officers teamed up with the athletes to form two teams. The score ended in a 4-4 tie but at the end of the day that is what the score is anyway in SOSC ‘cuz everyone does their best.

I saw camaraderie and teamwork. I heard A LOT of encouragement from all who were there.

Dustin Archer and Brian Ware were in goal. Both were determined to stop every shot that came their way.

I spoke to the members before and after the game to get their thoughts about how they felt the evening went.

Colby A. said that he was approached by Annette Bertrand to see if he and others would like to play with the floor hockey team, he said he would love to and that he was “excited and nervous” as he “didn’t know the game.

David Y. said he had “a lot of fun” and would “definitely do it again.”

 Glen M. replied that the playing was “excellent.”

Kevin S. was quoted as saying “It was so much fun” and “awesome.”

Tracy D. said she had “a good workout” and that she “had to work to get the puck.”

After an hour of play there was a team photo and the visiting RCMP members were given a souvenir Special O bag as a token of appreciation. All the players received a piece of red licorice.

Head Coach, Chuck Bertrand said it was “the most rewarding time he has ever had”

I really wanted to make this article especially about the coaches and all the effort and dedication they show to the athletes on a continuous basis. Without their time and energy we would not have Special Olympics on the Coast at all.

I sent out a note to the local coaches to ask them why they joined Special Olympics and the following are some of the responses I received.

This one came from softball coach & umpire, basketball referee and floor hockey and golf coach Chuck Bertrand:

“I coach because of athletes like yourself and all of the other Special Olympics athletes.

  Four years ago I had an opportunity to play a round of golf with Gus Vaughn, one of our local athletes, in a golf tournament. I enjoyed the round so much that afterwards I inquired how I could become involved in the Special Olympics program.  Two weeks later I was the assistant coach for floor hockey and I immediately became hooked with Special Olympics.

Since then I have been involved in referring basketball games, umpiring slow pitch games, coaching golf, softball and, of course, floor hockey.  I love the fact of seeing an athlete expertly dribbling down the basketball court and instead of going for the basket, passing the ball to young female athlete so that she might try to score. All the other players stop and wait as she manages to get the ball up over the net and then everyone cheers!  Or, when an athlete hits a home run and the catcher on the opposing team comes over to give him a high five for his fine efforts.

I have been around the block in sports, so to speak, from goaltending in the old Montreal Forum to umpiring at the Canada Summer Games. But of all those many sports that I have played, coached, refereed or umpired, my involvement in Special Olympics has been the most rewarding.

Two years ago my wife, Annette, became the Program Coordinator for Special Olympics here on the coast.  Whenever we get in our vehicle after a Special Olympics event, we both have a huge smile on our face.

Special Olympics athletes - no matter what level or what sport - always participate to 100% of their capabilities. Special Olympics is true sport as it was meant to be.”

Another great reply came from basketball head coach Samantha Mills:

“I find coaching Special Olympics basketball very rewarding.  It is the highlight of my week.  My athletes arrive each week with such wonderful energy and enthusiasm to learn the sport.  We have such fun warming up together, playing running games, doing various skill drills, and we finish each practice with a scrimmage that is always everyone's favorite time.  If there aren’t enough athletes to make two teams, the coaches love to join in the competition. I feel very proud as each of my athletes learns something new to them and tries to perfect a skill.  Obviously all athletes are at different levels, but they seem to help each other also and find joy in each other’s successes.  I enjoy watching them help each other score baskets and I beam inside when they work as a team, or try to do something I have worked hard to teach them.  I also love the ten minutes before and after practice when I get to know each of my athletes on a more personal level as we talk about the events in our weeks and share stories.  Coaching SO basketball is a wonderful way to combine one of my favorite sports with some of my favorite people!!”

Richard Hoath, a coach for Gibsons SOSC soccer sent me this entry:

“Every evening around the world people get together to kick around a ball.  For the exercise, to develop new skills, and mostly just to enjoy being part of a group activity.  This is why I volunteer to help coach Special Olympics soccer in Gibsons on Monday nights.  I enjoy watching the athletes tackle learning a new skill.  I get a thrill when someone celebrates completing a great pass or stopping a goal.  But one of the best moments of the evening is just sitting on the grass with the group for a water break and casual banter.  Then Wes calls out,

"Come on, let’s get going, the Canucks game starts at 7!"

Looking forward to starting up again this spring with the Gibsons team.”

And finally, a story from swim coach Cathy Verge:

 “I have to say my involvement with Special Olympics was prompted by my daughter Genny, being an athlete.  What I have found in Special O is a wonderful group of people who I am so thankful I am getting to know. The dedication and knowledge I have found in Marilyn, our head coach, is inspiring and I am indebted to her for her encouraging me to get my Coaching and Beyond with my Swimming 101. I have found in the athletes a wonderful dedicated group of individuals who bring their best to each practice. I can truly say that my Coaches training offered by Spec O, spills successfully into my employment and how I look at instructing fitness, swimming and coaching. Thank you Special O for letting see beyond the horizon to new possibilities.”

I would like to take this time now to honour two coaches who have retired.

Gary Rogers retired as swim coach after the 2013 Provincial Summer Games in Langley B.C. The efforts and the hard work and utter dedication he showed to the athletes under his direction make Gary a terrific coach and a man I consider a good friend.

Marilyn Adams will be retiring after our swim meet at U.B.C. on February 23rd. She is an organized, encouraging and kind person who makes the athletes feel like they can do anything.

I will miss the skills and encouragement of both these coaches and I would like to personally thank these special people for helping me get to the Provincial Games last year.

Marie Telder, Cathy Verge and Daryl Lowry will be stepping in to coach our swim team with the same awesome traits of their predecessors and mentors.

So as you can see, the fun never stops in the Special Olympics universe and I am overjoyed to be a part of this wonderful enterprise. Until next issue, play hard and have fun!

Micheal Oswald, athlete and reporter.