

TRUE SPORTS

Okanagan athletes
and coaches share
their experiences
with an organization
that uses sport to
open doors and
break down barriers
— Special Olympics

by Laurie Carter

PHOTOS CONTRIBUTED

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ame all the athletes who play on elite teams or compete individually at provincial, national and international levels — in more than one sport. Pretty short list? Not if you're into Special Olympics. These athletes define the term overachiever.

Special Olympics is all about empowering people with intellectual disabilities to reach their potential, and not just in sport. Sport is just the vehicle. Through training and competition, athletes benefit socially and spiritually as well as physically. And the benefits spill over into the community at large, promoting understanding, acceptance and inclusion.

"That's why I stay involved," says 24-year veteran coach Cherald Tutt. "When you see the difference it's made in so many lives. It develops the whole person, it's not just developing fitness and sport. The biggest thing for me is seeing how much the athletes have achieved and how much more accepting the community is at large."

The movement, which circles the globe, embracing 2.25 million athletes in over 150 countries, actually got its start in Canada. Four decades ago, University of Toronto scientist Dr. Frank Hayden conducted a study on the motor-skill development and fitness levels of children with intellectual disabilities. He concluded that a sport program, not a fitness routine, would be most effective and he went on to develop his ideas under the auspices of The Kennedy Foundation where Eunice Kennedy Shriver founded Special Olympics.

Canadian athletes competed in the first Special

encouraged to participate and everybody's recognized for performance. This process allows athletes at all levels to advance.

"The range of opportunities is really quite phenomenal," says Kelowna cross-country ski coach, Garth Vickers. "From people coming out for the first time to people like Glen (McIntyre) training to go to the Worlds for soccer... and what the people who come out the first time get out of it is just as important as what Glen's going to get."

Athletes have a whole range of reasons for participating. "I like to stay fit, have fun — and it's a way to be with my friends," says Jay Brooke, who plays soccer, softball, 5-pin bowling and belongs to the Vernon floor hockey team.

Tanya McIntosh, a Kelowna cross-country skier, powerlifter, aquatics, track and soccer competitor, says her favourite thing about sport is "the friendships I make on the way and working hard."

"If you get involved with Special Olympics, you get bitten...."

Olympics Games in the summer of 1968 and Special Olympics Canada was officially formed later that year by Toronto sportsman and business leader Harry "Red" Foster. The BC program began in 1980 and now includes eight official summer sports and seven winter sports.

Participation is wide open for people with intellectual disabilities. The minimum age requirement is eight years. There's no maximum age and no limit on the number of sports per athlete. Competition runs on a four year rotation: Year 1 — Regional Qualifiers; Year 2 — Provincials; Year 3 — Nationals; and Year 4 — World Games.

A unique "divisioning" process structures events so that athletes compete with others of similar ability. Everybody's

SPORTS

WINTER

ALPINE SKIING
CURLING
FIGURE SKATING
FLOOR HOCKEY
NORDIC (CROSS-COUNTRY) SKIING
SNOWSHOEING
SPEED SKATING

SUMMER

ATHLETICS (TRACK & FIELD)
AQUATICS
POWERLIFTING
RHYTHMIC GYMNASTICS
SOCCER
SOFTBALL
5- AND 10-PIN BOWLING

ATHLETE OATH

"LET ME WIN. BUT IF I CANNOT WIN,
LET ME BE BRAVE IN THE ATTEMPT."

Penticton curlers Lynden Hicks and Chad Conlon both like meeting new people and appreciate the opportunity to travel.

Their coach, Dona Cade, maintains that the biggest thing is having fun. "Sportsmanship and fun are very important to our Special Olympics athletes. You can have fun and compete."

But athletes can't do either without the backing of their coaches and a huge contingent of volunteers who coordinate programs, events, fundraising, public relations, finances and administration.

"If you get involved with Special Olympics, you get bitten," Cherald says. "The organization does a lot for volunteers — workshops and training. They promote your education. It's a really good organization with a lot of follow-through."

Special Olympics is an active partner with the National Coach Certification Program (NCCP) and



VERNON FLOOR
HOCKEY PLAYERS
HAM FOR THE
CAMERA BETWEEN
SHIFTS

offers a Level 1 Special Olympics course as well as training on working with people with intellectual disabilities. Many coaches also qualify for higher NCCP certification levels.

Regional Coordinator Mitch Nystrom, who's coached several sports (currently floor hockey), admits that juggling family, work and Special Olympics is sometimes challenging. "But you get the reward thing. So it's all worth it." He remembers a particular highlight at an international softball competition. "We were staying at North Carolina State, eating in the cafeteria and Davy (2nd baseman) pipes up and says, 'I just want to tell you guys, I've never had a family. Now I feel like I have a family.' It was pretty cool."

Garth says, "It's a lifestyle for a lot of our athletes. And if it's not a lifestyle it's at least a year-round organization that offers them competition, training, friendship, social opportunities and, for some, it offers public speaking, volunteering and fund raising."

When he first started with Special Olympics, Garth was surprised to learn about its athlete leadership programs including the Speakers Bureau, Athlete Representative Workshop and Program Mentors Workshop. He recently attended a sports celebrity banquet with two Kelowna athlete-public speakers, Glen and Andrew McIntyre. While there, they met a friend, an athlete from Vancouver, who had just returned from representing British Columbia at the World Congress.

"I've seen changes in so many athletes," Cherald says. "Their self-confidence, their ability to produce... They can go out and get jobs, several are married, driving cars. It's an all-around development. It's what happens when you get involved in sport and it snowballs into other areas of your life. There's that pride. They feel proud of themselves — what they're achieving and what they can do."



Alpine skiing



MOUNTAIN MAN JEFF PENNY PROSPECTING FOR GOLD

Alpine is the riskiest winter sport in Special Olympics, but you'd never know it talking to South Okanagan skiers. Even though their teammate, Special O legend Murray Maxwell, suffered a potentially career-ending broken leg at the end of last season, the rest of the gang is still raring to go. Of the 11 racers in the program, six have qualified to compete in the Provincials. We caught up with three team members on a lunch break at Apex Mountain Resort (otherwise we'd have been shouting questions as they rocketed down the slope).

"I like skiing and racing. I have a great time," says Carl Richard, a grade-12 student from Summerland, who adds that he likes it when people cheer for him and he likes to cheer for his teammates.

As he carefully empties four ketchup packets on his fries, Carl explains that he couldn't ski at all when he started with Special Olympics. But within a year he was competing in his first Provincial Games and Nancy Greene Raine was hanging medals around his neck.

Shannon Baker was there too, receiving her own medals. She's been with the Penticton program since it started eight years ago. Along with Murray, Shannon was one of coach Bruce Pearce's original three skiers and she's had an impressive career including a trip

"I go straight down. I'm a mountain man."

to the Nationals where she won two silver medals.

"I ski the giant slalom, the slalom and downhill. I kind of do everything," she says, although giant slalom is her favourite event. "It's a little harder because you go a longer course for giant slalom than you do for the downhill. It takes more out of you."

As we talk, Jeff Penny, the third member of the provincial team is wolfing down his burger. He just wants to get back on the slopes. "I go straight down," he says. "I'm a mountain man." (Coach interjects, "the big issue is teaching him to turn — on occasion. He's got legs like tree stumps, very strong legs.")

They're all multi-talented athletes. Carl plays 5- and 10-pin bowling for Summerland and softball for the Penticton team. Jeff, who graduated last year and now works for the Penticton and District Society for Community Living, fits bowling into his schedule, while Shannon, who works for a daycare centre and keeps in shape by walking from her home to work every day, also bowls, swims and plays softball.

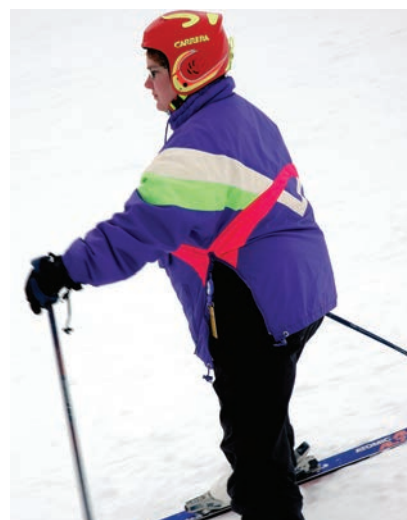
PROVINCIAL QUALIFIERS:

PENTICTON

Shannon Baker
Ryan Kruger
Jeff Penny
Carl Richard
Virginia Wysoski

KELOWNA

Ryan Courtemanche
Rob Farley
Colin Kelly
Jen Richardson
Joanne Seefried
Craig Warner
Sarah Wintemute
Kelsey Wyse
Bruce York



TWO-TIME NATIONAL GAMES SILVER MEDALIST SHANNON BAKER TUNES UP HER TURNS

But this is ski season and each racer has goals for the Provincial Games. Jeff has his sights set on three medals and Carl wants to go on to Nationals. Shannon simply says, "I'll be doing my best."

And that's so much of what it's about. All three agree that meeting new people and seeing old friends they've competed against in the past is a really enjoyable part of Special Olympics. When asked why others should consider getting involved, not one of them mentions medals. Shannon sums it up. "I would say it's a good idea to learn to ski. They'll have fun and enjoy the fresh air and meet new people."

PHOTOS BY LILLIE LOUISE MAJOR



TIFFANY BJORNDAI,
ALEX HAVERSTOCK,
JEFF PENNY,
SHANNON BAKER
AND CARL RICHARD
HIT THE SLOPES AT
APEX EVERY SUNDAY

Coach's Corner

When Bruce Pearce got a call asking if he could find somebody to coach Murray Maxwell, the life-long skier decided to take on the job himself. Eight years later, the program has grown from three athletes to 11, ranging in age from 12 to 50-plus, with members who have qualified right up to the international level. Every Sunday through the season, the *Okanagan Life* account exec heads to Apex Mountain — snow, rain, sleet — nothing stops his team.

"You're basically teaching them to run gates," Bruce says. "And sometimes, depending on their level of disability, it's a challenge to get them to

go through the course properly. Then you're trying to teach them technique and finally competitiveness."

Seeing the athletes succeed is a big part of what keeps him at it. "Every time I go to an event, every time I see them get up on the podium, I never fail to get tears in my eyes — and so often they get tears in their eyes."

Bruce is equally thrilled by the reception his skiers get when they return from competition with ceremonies in their schools, stories in the local papers, even well-wishers meeting them at the airport. He's seen a massive change in public attitude since his own youth when people with intellectual disabilities were often hidden away.

"You go to the mountain with us on the weekend and we're in the cafeteria — all their school friends are coming over and chatting with them — not shunning them the way people would have in the old days."

Bruce says Special Olympics athletes are "the most unique people you can deal with, people who are the way we all should be." ■

PHOTO BY LILLIE LOUISE MAJOR

Cross-country skiing



TANYA MCINTOSH,
AMANDA MILLWARD,
MARIA SCHMITKE:
TRAINING TIME-OUT

MARIA SCHMITKE
SHARES HER SILVER
MEDAL MOMENT
WITH MOM AT THE
2005 SPECIAL
OLYMPICS WORLD
WINTER GAMES IN
NAGANO, JAPAN

Cross-country skiing is major for Okanagan athletes with teams from both Kelowna and Penticton slated to compete in the BC Winter Games. Entering its third decade as a Special Olympics sport, cross-country events range from 500 metres to 10 K plus a 4x1 K relay.

The Kelowna team is hard at dryland training. We can talk, as long as they can keep on stepping, lifting and squeezing their way around the weight room circuit at Parkinson Rec Centre.

Tanya McIntosh plans to compete in 500 metre, 1 K and 2.5 K races. She's been into Special O for five years and along with cross-country, she competes in powerlifting, track, swimming and soccer.

"I love working out," says the 37-year-old athlete who's no stranger to advanced competition. In the last four-year cycle, she went to Nationals with a team from the Lower Mainland, where she lived at the time. Last summer, after her move to Kelowna, she returned to Nationals in track and field and came home with gold and silver. Her goal for these games is to advance for a three-peat. Despite all the successes, Tanya says her favourite thing about competition is "the friendships I make on the way and working hard."

Amanda Millward is an 18-year-old grade-12 student at KSS. In her second year of cross-country, she's excited about

PROVINCIAL QUALIFIERS:

PENTICTON

Kevin Ellis
Richard Niesman

KELOWNA

Kirk Gawryluk
Katarina Gerhardt
Meagan Hydamaska
Jordan Lige
Chris McFarlane
Tanya McIntosh
Glen McIntyre
Neil Melesko
Tracy Melesko
Amanda Millward
Maria Schmitke
Avitol Yarosky
Angie Young

VERNON

Ryan Creelman



her first trip to Provincials. For her, the best thing about competitions is hanging out with friends. Amanda's goal for the Kelowna Games is to go out and have fun.

Twenty-four year old Meagan Hydamaska recently moved to Kelowna from Prince George. In addition to cross-country, she's into aquatics, powerlifting, soccer and track. A multi-time competitor in both summer and winter games, Meagan will still be representing Prince George this time around. She likes meeting new people through competition and "doing the best I can every day — I give it my all."

In these games, Meagan says, "I'll do my best, give it all I have. I want to go to the Worlds. All you have to do is work for it — you just need a good attitude." Her message for readers is to come and watch. "It's the

LARGE PHOTO BY LILLIE LOUISE MAJOR

Coach's Corner

"I love cross-country skiing and this particular group is just a joy to coach," says Garth Vickers, head of the Kelowna cross-country ski program for the last eight years. A career special ed teacher, Garth appreciates the enthusiasm and dedication he sees. "There are 12 or 13 athletes going to Provincials just from Kelowna and on most days we have a dozen athletes turning up to train. They come on their own time, out of scheduled practice — that's a highlight."

And there are lots more — like seeing the athletes improve from year to year; like attending the Nationals with six Kelowna skiers; like going on to the Worlds with two local athletes who medalled in every race they were in.

"But, honestly," he says, "A day-to-day practice is almost as big a high. When we go to Telemark and the snow's good and the skiers are good enough to get to the top of the biggest hills and spend two hours and keep the pace and enjoy the scenery.... On the other hand, we get to see somebody who's a first year skier, learning just to ski around the stadium — how much excitement — and to see him actually get a race and progress to the next level. There are so many highlights."

Special Olympics has given Garth an opportunity to see adults with intellectual disabilities at their best and to see opportunities for his high school students when they graduate.

"This group we have here is almost like a family," Garth says. "They really support each other. They have a strong social network and their opportunity to develop skills and confidence has been enhanced by their participation in Special Olympics. I don't know where they would get it otherwise." ■



best. The athletes are so talented. I enjoy being around them and wish them all the best in their sports."

Maria Schmitke competes in cross-country, powerlifting, soccer and softball. The 23-year-old brought home three cross-country silver medals from the last World Games and shows a great attitude. "It's fun even if you don't win," she says. "Just try your best, that's all that counts."

Maria says cross-country is her favourite sport because she's good at it (no kidding). In these Games she'll do her best and hope that translates into medals and one more trip to the Nationals. "Come and watch," she says.

Andrew and Glen McIntyre are a matched set. The 25-year-old twin brothers are about as athletic as they come with a whopping 44 medals racked up between them (18 and 26 respectively). Andrew's sports include snowshoeing (read more in the snowshoe section), floor hockey, powerlifting and softball. Both compete in track, cross-country and soccer, which is a total family affair where their dad, Jim McIntyre, calls the shots as coach.

Big brother Andrew (older by 14 minutes) will be strapping on his snowshoes for the Kelowna Games while Glen looks for more medals with the cross-country team. And they're both rooting for each other.

Andrew boasts that Glen is heading to the Shanghai Worlds as a member of the Canadian soccer team. Glen counters that his brother "whooped" everybody in a race, finishing more than a full lap ahead of the field.

When he skis up to the start line at Telemark in February, Glen's sights will be set on the Nationals. While he claims soccer as his favourite sport, this guy's no slouch on the boards and he's looking for payback. A freak blizzard took out his race in the last round of Nationals preventing him from qualifying for the Worlds.

Glen credits his tremendous success to hard work and mental toughness. "I never give up," he says. "I always try to have fun. That's a big thing — and I believe in myself."



COACH GARTH VICKERS: "THERE ARE SO MANY HIGHLIGHTS"

KEVIN ELLIS AND RICHARD NIESMAN: PENTICTON'S OWN FRANK AND GORDON

MULTI-SPORT MULTI-MEDALIST MEAGAN HYDAMASKA PUMPS IRON FOR GOLD

>>>



GLEN MCINTYRE,
ALREADY HEADING TO
THE WORLD SUMMER
GAMES IN SHANGHAI,
AIMS TO SKI HIS WAY
TO THE 2009 WORLD
WINTER GAMES

>>>

Mental skill is a big thing in sports. Even the best athletes don't do well when they're not mentally prepared."

On the Penticton team, Kevin Ellis and Richard Niesman (known to their teammates and fans as Frank and Gordon) are two more athletic overachievers. We caught up with them at the bowling alley.

Kevin, who played on the bronze-medal softball team in last summer's Nationals, trains for cross-country by walking and biking — and we're not talking little jaunts around the block. His idea of a good ride is pedaling from Penticton to Princeton and back — although he concedes to camping out overnight on the way.

The 28-year-old, who lives in his own apartment in Penticton, loves to travel. Looking forward to seeing friends at the Winter Games, he aims to beat his own times and move on. "I'm trying to get to see Quebec City (host of next winter's National Games) for the first time."

Kevin says it feels good to stand on the podium and he urges people to "come and support the teams and help us with volunteering and coaching."

His partner, Richard Niesman (a.k.a. Gordon), is 48 years old and looks about 35. As well as cross-country, he's a bowler, averaging 180 in 5-pin and 125 in 10-pin, which he likes to play with his wife Tamara (although the coach won't put married couples on the same team — wise coach). Richard was also a member of the bronze-medal softball team. "It was my first time on a plane," he says. "But I liked it."

Richard has two important goals for the Kelowna Games: "I'm going to try to beat Kevin, and I want to get to the finish line." Seems he has a mental block about the last 10 feet. "We have a fun time and my coach is at the finish line and I'm this far away (arms spread) and I fall every time, every time. Just before the finish line, I fall." No matter — this year he figures his chances are "half and half" and that's fine with him.

Before the race Richard says he'll shake hands with everybody. "At competition you meet some new friends. I like that. Special Olympics is really good to do. All the coaches are really good, they're really nice."



Coach's Corner

Penticton cross-country coach Bob Hazell couldn't ski. When the program started five years ago, he thought he'd help out by driving athletes back and forth to the hill. But the organizer had to back out and Bob was suddenly in for some fast learning. Not that he's willing to take any bows. Despite having two athletes headed for the Provincials, Bob places all the credit with the Kelowna coaches who invited his group to double up with them.

"It's worked so well for my guys," he says. "Kevin keeps asking me, 'Is it time to go skiing yet?' He loves it, and that's what it's all about."

While Bob may be short on coaching experience, he's no stranger to Special Olympics. His wife Mona's been involved for 18 years, currently coaching softball, bowling and acting as treasurer. Before taking up with the cross-country team, Bob worked as a volunteer and did the books.

Bob says he owes his athletes a lot, that coaching has made him a gentler person. "These guys have got a secret the rest of you should tap into. It's about participation — getting out and having some fun. That's the message they're giving me... It's changed my outlook on sport." ■

PHOTOS BY LILLIE LOUISE MAJOR



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Curling



KELOWNA CURLERS
TAKE TO THE ICE
WEDNESDAYS AT
THE CURLING CLUB

LORRAINE SWEEPS
HARD FOR KELOWNA

Curling is relatively new to Special Olympics. First introduced as a demonstration sport at the 2000 Canada National Games, it hasn't yet been recognized at the international level although it is a full medal sport in this country. At the BC Winter Games, 20 teams in three or four divisions will compete in a points system round robin bonspiel.

Running up to the games, four athletes gather around a table with a view. Through the window, ice gleams white under bright lights and clutches of frozen gray stones rest near the outer ring of a red and blue target waiting for practice to begin.

The Penticton curling team is willing to chat — but not for long. These players are itching to snap on their sliders and get to work. No strangers to competition, they know what it takes to mount a winning effort.

"It's hard work. The other teams are tough, strong. You've got to know their routine to win," says Lynden Hicks, who knows what he's talking about. He and Chad Conlon curled on the gold-medal team at the 2004 Prince Edward Island Games, a stunning accomplishment, although tinged with the disappointment of not being able to move on to international competition. But nobody's dwelling on the past.

These guys are into the game. For sweeper Allan Harbidge, "It's a rush. I love it."

"It's hard work. You have to keep fit," says fellow sweeper,

PROVINCIAL COMPETITORS:

PENTICTON

Chad Conlon
Allan Harbidge
Lynden Hicks
Greg Ovenden
Frank Trovao (alternate)

VERNON

Robert Penning
Jamie Potter
Glyn Ramsdale
Tom Wilde



Greg Ovenden, adding that you have to concentrate on being a team player, "learning to work together and not get too uptight on the ice."

And how does the team work together — stay calm?

"Talk," says Lynden.

"Don't look at the scoreboard," quips Chad.

Together, the Penticton curlers hope to move up from their second place finish at the last Provincial Games, and they'd like lots of Okanagan fans there to see them do it.

"They should come out and watch Special Olympics," says Chad. "They'll get a surprise."

"We're pretty good," adds Allan.

"Watch us and see what it's like," says Lynden. "If you have friends who might want to join Special Olympics, come out and see what the sports are all about. That's what I tell people I know. Get out. Do it."

PHOTOS BY LILLIE LOUISE MAJOR



Coach's Corner

Dona Cade heads up the team of three coaches and one volunteer that works with the eight athletes in Penticton's curling program. The Level 2 certified coach explains that newcomers need one-on-one attention and she works closely with those who go on to advanced competition to perfect their skills and strategy.

"We work in smaller steps with lots of repetition," she says. "It can be challenging and the results you get might take longer, but the results are more rewarding. It just feels good."

Recruited in 2000 by the head coach of the Penticton Curling Club, where Dona's been a member for 20 years, the retiree is clearly proud of her athletes who range in age from 13 to 41. She's also grateful to the community for its support. Thanks to local donations, each of the five provincial competitors has his own broom and the team wears matching jackets when they curl in the Friday night generic league.

Dona says the highlight of working with Special Olympics curlers is seeing them complete a task they're set out to do. "When the skip asks for a shot and the player does that shot — when the shot is called and made — those faces out there are beaming. They're ecstatic and they show it. It's pretty rewarding." ■

PHOTOS BY LILLIE LOUISE MAJOR



FAST FACTS

ABOUT 170 MILLION PEOPLE (THREE PER CENT OF THE WORLD'S POPULATION) HAVE INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES — THE LARGEST DISABILITY POPULATION IN THE WORLD

IN BC, 75 PER CENT OF SPECIAL OLYMPICS ATHLETES ARE ADULTS

TEAM PENTICTON
CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP LEFT: ALLAN
HARBRIDGE, GREG
OVENDEN, LYNDEN
HICKS AND CHAD
CONLON HOPE
TO SEE LOTS OF
OKANAGAN FANS AT
THE KELOWNA GAMES

Floor hockey



FLOOR HOCKEY
VERNON: ACTION,
EXCITEMENT AND
TONS OF TEAM SPIRIT

Think ice hockey meets ringette. Floor hockey is the only team sport in the Special Olympics Winter Games and it's all about action. Played on a wood or concrete surface, six players per side (including a goalie) slide, pass and shoot a big felt disk using wooden sticks that look like broom handles.

The Okanagan region is sending a composite team to the Winter Games with players from Vernon, Kelowna and Kamloops. We snagged two Vernon veterans for a quick interview while the regular weekly players warmed up in the gym at West Vernon Elementary.

*“They usually whoop our ass...
...I think they were a little shocked.”*

Jay Brooke and Matt Bushey think it's fun that they'll be teaming up with Kelowna players for the big competition. In the friendly rivalry between the two cities, Kelowna always comes out on top. “They usually whoop our ass,” Jay says. But in the tournament to decide who would advance to

OKANAGAN REGIONAL TEAM:

VERNON

Bryan Blossom
Jay Brooke
Matt Bushey
Marcus Carberry
Robyn Markortoff
Curtis Thomas

KELOWNA

James Blacke
Chris Harrington

KAMLOOPS

Trevor Campise
John Craig
Tony Cugliatta
Mat Sadler
Joe Sienna
Wayne Tucker

Provincials, Vernon pulled an upset.

“We beat out Kelowna,” Matt crows. “It was a surprise, because we never beat them. I think they were a little shocked.”

However, none of the cities has enough advanced players to compete at the next level. So they joined up and created the composite squad (six players each from Vernon and Kamloops plus two from Kelowna) that will represent the region. This is a common practice in Special Olympics that underscores the basic values of the organization.

Like so many Special O athletes, Jay, who's 27 years old, plays other sports — soccer, softball and 5-pin bowling. He's also an accomplished public speaker and travels extensively, educating people like foster parents and law enforcement officers about Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD). For him, participating in sports is a way to stay fit, have fun and be with friends.

Nine years older than his teammate, Matt also plays soccer and softball and helps to coach the floor hockey team. He works for Vernon and District Community Living “doing lots of jobs like recycling,

PHOTO BY LILLIE LOUISE MAJOR

Coach's Corner

Special Olympics snagged Mitch Nystrom in 1987 when the Law Enforcement Torch Fund rolled into Kamloops. At the time he was working in the jail (he's now a probation officer) and agreed to take on the project. "That was my way in the door," he says. "I played a lot of high-level sports when I was younger and I knew it was time to give back."

Mitch started the floor hockey program in Kamloops, then things got a little out of hand. "One thing about Special Olympics is there are never enough volunteers, so if they get a newbie in town.... Being young and energetic, I coached floor hockey, track and field, softball and I was fundraising coordinator — I'd been there for three months."

Although he's scaled back on the coaching, Mitch is more heavily involved than ever. As regional coordinator he has responsibility for eight locals including the Okanagan plus Kamloops, Revelstoke and Clearwater. "I try to help them meet the needs of their local," he explains. He also sits on the Leadership Council, a body that handles policy and mediates issues around the province.

But the best experiences involve the athletes. Mitch remembers the World Games when he was helping to coach the softball team. "We had a guy that wasn't very good. He was our weakest player, so we hid him on second base. Final game, playing for the World Championship — two out, guy on third — ball comes to Davy. Everybody's yelling, 'Catch the ball, Davy.' And Davy catches the ball. He throws it to first base and we win the World Championship!"

Mitch's face splits in a championship grin. "You don't get that in generic sport. That to me is life and that's what's exciting about Special Olympics." ■



maintenance and building trails in area parks."

They both love floor hockey. Jay says it's "because you're active. It gets you out of the house. The more active stuff that you do, you don't have to be cooped up being a couch potato."

Matt gets a charge out of the players he helps to coach. "Everybody loves to come out and play," he says. "Everybody. They've never got a frown on their face they're always smiling. That's the best thing."

While Jay and Matt aren't definite about their chances at the Provincials, they hope to advance. But at the same time, both men are keen for their local team to experience the benefits of travel. And that takes money. "Please generously give," says Jay. "Your donations pay for the bus rental, planes. Your donations get us out of BC."

"They never get to leave Vernon," Matt adds. "If they got a chance to go for a tournament somewhere, they'd go. For these guys to go on a trip, they'd be in heaven."

COACH MITCH
NYSTROM WITH
DAVID ELWORTHY

JAY BROOKE (LEFT)
AND MATT BUSHEY:
MEMBERS OF
THE COMPOSITE
VERNON/KELOWNA/
KAMLOOPS SQUAD
REPRESENTING
OUR REGION AT
THE BC GAMES

Snowshoeing



**PENTICTON
SNOWSHOERS**
GERALD LUDWAR,
COACH RAY HUSON,
LORELIE BURNETTE,
MANDY MURRAY AND
SHARON SERWA:
LONG ON TALENT
AND EXPERIENCE

Snowshoeing became an official Special Olympics sport at the 1997 World Winter Games in Toronto. Essentially a running race on snow, the events range from 100 to 1,500 metres plus a 4x100 metre relay. Athletes must compete in at least two races plus the relay. In addition, the regulations require that only traditional wooden snowshoes with rawhide lacing be used — no cleats for added traction — no high-tech design.

“I’ve only got two gold at home. My brother’s got 14. I’ve got to catch up.”

No worries for the Penticton snowshoe team. Long on experience, Lorelie Burnette, Sharon Serwa and Gerald Ludwar have all been with the program since it began 12 years ago. Even Mandy Murray, the relative new kid on the block and the only member of the team who hasn’t yet competed at the provincial level, is into her fourth year. Both Lorelie and Gerald have also gone on to National’s —

PROVINCIAL QUALIFIERS:

PENTICTON

Lorelie Burnette
Gerald Ludwar
Mandy Murray
Sharon Serwa

KELOWNA

Anne Allen
Chad Gayowski
Laura Gerhardt
Brad Grills
Andrew McIntyre

Lorelie in the 2000 Ottawa Games and Gerald in the 2004 Prince Edward Island Games.

So much history leads to high expectations. Everybody wants to win ribbons. Mandy is looking for her first gold and Lorelie says, “I hope I win a ribbon — run fast — get a gold medal.”

But the athletes say there’s more to it than winning ribbons. They all agree that making new friends is one of the major attractions of Special Olympics. They’re all involved in other sports such as bowling, aquatics, tennis, softball and soccer.

Yet the snowshoers particularly love this sport. They train at the Carmi Cross-Country Ski Trails or, if there’s enough snow in the valley, at area golf courses or school sports fields. Lorelie says, “It’s fun to run hard” and Gerald adds, “I like to run on snow.”

From the Kelowna contingent, Andrew McIntyre, one half of the matched set McIntyre twins (read more in the cross-country section), is aiming high in the snowshoe competition. Although he only joined Special Olympics four years ago, the 24-year-old who works at Quality Greens, has set his sights on three gold. Discounting his 16 assorted silver and bronze medals, Andrew says, “I’ve only got two gold at home. My brother’s got 14, I’ve got to catch up.”

Nothing like a little friendly sibling rivalry.

PHOTO BY LILLIE LOUISE MAJOR



Coach's Corner

Ray Huson's day job, brewer at the Barley Mill Pub Micro Brewery, keeps him busy, but he's still found time to coach the Penticton snowshoe team since the program started 12 years ago.

"Special Olympics is a great organization," he says. "It's nice to be able to give back to the community and the athletes are great. They have a lot of fun."

Ray thinks the social element is a key motivator. "When we go out of town for competitions, they meet people. Then they're always asking: 'When are we going here or when are we going there?'" They want to see people they haven't seen for a long time," he says. "Special Olympics gives athletes a chance to be with their friends and have a few laughs."

Not that athletes are the only ones who benefit. Volunteers tend to stick with Special Olympics for years. "I know the people in Penticton," Ray says. "A lot of them have been volunteering for a long time and that must say something. They enjoy it and everybody gets something out of it."

Ray hopes that lots of people will take advantage of the opportunity to attend the Winter Games and support Okanagan athletes — just as they support each other. "That's something about Special Olympics," he says. "They'll get out there and cheer everybody. They'll stay out in the cold and cheer other athletes, and sometimes in generic sport you don't see that." ■

PHOTOS BY LILLIE LOUISE MAJOR



COMPETITORS RACE ON TRADITIONAL WOOD AND RAWHIDE SNOWSHOES, NO CLEATS



ANDREW MCINTYRE (RED SHIRT) AND TWIN BROTHER GLEN WORK OUT TOGETHER BUT COMPETE IN DIFFERENT SPORTS. TO DATE, THEIR COMBINED COUNT STANDS AT 44 SPECIAL OLYMPICS MEDALS

FAST FACTS

OKANAGAN SPECIAL OLYMPICS INCLUDES 604 REGISTERED ATHLETES AND 367 VOLUNTEERS

SPECIAL OLYMPICS VS PARALYMPICS

SPECIAL OLYMPICS IS FOR PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES. PARALYMPICS INVOLVES ATHLETES WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES



VETERAN SPECIAL OLYMPICS VOLUNTEER CHERALD TUTT: VENUE MANAGER FOR THE BC WINTER GAMES IN KELOWNA, FEB 15-18

Coach Tutt

Now in her 24th year with Special Olympics, former Kelowna special needs teacher Cheryl Tutt's been there, done that. For most of her tenure, she's been heavily involved with administration, advancing from local to regional positions, then on to the Provincial Program Committee and finally chairing a program committee for Special Olympics Canada. But no amount of paperwork could keep Cheryl away from the athletes.

"Even though I was administration, I was always coaching," she says. "Over those many, many years I've coached swimming and a peewee type program that was for young special needs children and I've coached 10-pin bowling. Lots of coaching."

And lots of highlights. Cheryl has a hard time picking one memorable Special Olympics experience from so many. But she settles on the Kelowna Grizzlies softball triumph — gold at the World Games. "Just to see that...I've had tons

of moments, I could go on and on, but that was exciting."

Cheryl added curling to her coaching repertoire for the 95 games. "I'd curled when I was in university, so I was really happy when we started to get curling programs. I really developed myself in that area." She's now certified as a Level 2 coach and while she's cut back on the administration, Cheryl can't resist a bit of light organizing.

Liaising with teachers from Rutland Junior, KSS, KLO and Immaculata, she's formed a sport buddy system that pairs two special needs people with two typical students to compete in a mini-curling league.

"We've got quite a few athletes from the high schools who started in my program and went on to Special Olympics," says the coach. "It brings in new athletes, especially those who don't think Special Olympics is for them. Once they get involved, they find — Wow — it could be for them and they get into other sports."

In spite of her enthusiasm, though, Cheryl isn't a total sports fanatic. When one of her best curlers, Brad Grills (also a gold medal winner at last summer's National Games), had to give up curling because it conflicted with his job at Okanagan College, Cheryl understood. Even though it meant the Kelowna team didn't make this year's Provincials, "I think work is important," she says. "They have to have balance — and he's still excelling, he's still doing sport. He just doesn't have time for curling."

That ability for athletes to excel is a big part of what's kept Cheryl involved for so long. "You see the difference it makes in so many lives." **OL**

SPONSOR-AN-ATHLETE

Special Olympics BC's Sponsor-an-Athlete program gives individuals, families and companies a way to get involved. Sponsorship is based on the cost of on-going training and expenses associated with sending athletes to competition. There are 560 athletes aged 12 and up participating in the Winter Games. Sponsor an individual (\$100) or team (\$1,000–\$2,500).

Pick your sport or leave it to Special Olympics, then follow your athlete and/or team during competition via the Games website. You won't get a medal for your sponsorship — but somebody will.

Donations are tax deductible. For full details, contact the 2007 SOBC Winter Games office at 861.6582, email games@specialolympics.bc.ca or visit www.specialolympics.bc.ca.

2007 SPECIAL OLYMPICS BC WINTER GAMES

February 15 to 18 more than 760 athletes, coaches and volunteers from across the province converge on Kelowna to compete in the Provincial Games. With 90 athletes from the Valley, Okanaganites have plenty of reasons to get out and cheer.

VENUES

Crystal Mountain: alpine skiing
Telemark: cross-country skiing and snowshoeing
Kelowna Curling Club: curling
Capital News Centre: speed skating
Rutland: floor hockey and figure skating

GET INVOLVED

An army of volunteers is needed for special events, food services, transportation, medical, accommodations, security and sports services. To get involved, drop into the Games office at Capri Centre Mall in Kelowna, email games@specialolympics.bc.ca or visit www.specialolympics.bc.ca.

PHOTO BY LILLIE LOUISE MAJOR