

Let me be brave in the attempt

Skill. Courage. Sharing. Joy.
Four simple words beat in the hearts of Special Olympics athletes and are etched in the medals worn proudly around their necks. Those involved with Special Olympics live these words daily. These four simple words also describe the first state equestrian competition for Special Olympics Oklahoma.

Skill

The first Oklahoma Special Olympics equestrian event was held at the Oklahoma State University Animal Science Arena Oct. 25, 2003.

Since the organization's arrival to Oklahoma in 1969, more than 8,300 athletes have participated in 15 sports, the most recent being equestrian.

Twenty-eight equestrian athletes each competed in three of the four offered events—working trails, pole bending, barrel racing and figure-eight stake racing.

Event planning and training of the athletes and coaches took two years, said Teri Hockett, a program director with Special Olympics Oklahoma.

"Here in Oklahoma, it just makes sense," said Hockett. "We've got horses and cowboys, so why don't we do an equestrian program and give it a shot?"

To date, Oklahoma has 15 certified coaches. The free training lasts two days.

While not required, it is encouraged that the individuals who want to be coaches have experience with horses, said Hockett.

When working with coaches, there is a great deal of responsibility involved, said Larry Casillas, president of the Oklahoma Palomino Exhibitors Association, national youth adviser for the Palomino Horsebreeders of America and event director of the Special Olympics Oklahoma equestrian.

"We work with members of the OSU rodeo and equestrian teams to train new coaches," he said. They help with training and play the part of the athletes.

"There's a lot that goes into [training], including how to assist the athlete in mounting and dismounting the horse," said Casillas. "It's the coach's responsibility to find out the ability of the athlete and the disposition of the horse and match them."

Once trained and certified, coaches begin working with athletes to prepare for state competition.

"The athletes must train for a minimum of eight weeks with a certified Special Olympics equestrian coach in the event they are going to participate in," said Hockett.

Casillas and his wife, Pati, initially became involved in Special Olympics in January 2003 as certified coaches for the Northeastern Equestrian Team of Oklahoma. The team consists of two athletes, Stephen Harvey and Heather Sossamon.

"We work on controlling their horse, maneuvering around obstacles, and their balance and posture in the saddle to try to give them better horsemanship overall," said Pati Casillas. "They don't just show up and ride. They have to take care of their horse. We've taught them to brush and saddle their horse; even pick the hooves. There's a lot of work involved."

The Casillas' team usually practices three hours each Saturday, Pati Casillas said. She and Larry have donated the horses, equipment, barn and time to train their team.

"Our kids have come from where they could not handle a horse at all to being able to handle a horse on their own," said Pati Casillas. "I think it gives them more confidence."

Working with the athletes has taught the two coaches many things, but most of all patience, said Pati Casillas.

"We take so much for granted; it just teaches you patience in that not everyone has the same ability," she said.

Courage

Perhaps the most important word etched on the medals worn by Special Olympics athletes, courage is exemplified by each individual and his or her family on a daily basis.

Susan Sossamon, the mother of Heather, has witnessed the effects of Special Olympics on her daughter since the second grade.

For Heather, outward appearances belie her "differences" from those with whom she comes in contact.

"With Heather, 'courage' means being different and dealing with people who treat others differently," Susan Sossamon said. "The hardest to deal with are words that cut like knives."

Special Olympics has given Heather, and others, the courage to be herself and be confident in who she is, said Susan Sossamon.

"By using the strength and courage from being different, they become stronger," she said. "To stand up to people who are different and be themselves and stand up for themselves and accept who they are takes courage."

Besides the courage the athletes gain by being involved in Special Olympics, the family members of these athletes learn about being "different" as well.

"In the school system, [the athletes] are different; put them in Special Olympics and you and I are different," said Susan Sossamon. "Everything centers around them."

Heather competed in the International Special Olympics games in 1998 at the age of 16, and since then, she has changed tremendously, her mother said.

"When Heather came back, she had gained more self confidence from the whole thing," said Susan Sossamon. "She built confidence and self-esteem by working as a team, accomplishing goals and showing everybody they could do this."

Sharing

Special Olympics would not exist today—and could not have been created—without the time, energy, commitment and enthusiasm of more than 500,000 Special Olympics volunteers. Special Olympics relies on volunteers at all levels to ensure each athlete is offered a quality sports training and competition experience.

More than 1,700 volunteer coaches and thousands of sponsors, donors and volunteers conduct the 100-plus events held annually to support Special Olympics Oklahoma.

Fifty volunteers from OSU and Stillwater assisted in the equestrian event, working as sidewalkers, helping set up patterns and working with athletes as their personal assistants.

"We do whatever they ask us to; we help them get ready to ride and make sure they get to their event on time," said Andrea Bryant, an agricultural communications alumna and volunteer at the event.

"It makes them feel like stars, which is important," said Bryant. Bryant and her friend Amanda Early, an agricultural education alumna, began volunteering for Special Olympics during the 2003 Summer Games.

"It makes you feel like a better person. You've made a difference and they remember you. It's a great feeling," said Bryant. "The reason we wanted to volunteer for the equestrian events is because we've both shown horses."

Their past involvement in competitive horse shows and their experience at the Special Olympics equestrian event has given them a unique perspective, said Bryant.

"What's different about this than normal horse shows is that at normal horse shows, you're so competitive and everyone is distant," said Bryant. "In [Special Olympics], everybody's helping each other; it's not based so much on the win."

"The friendship here is stronger. Everyone is happy to see each other, and they make sure their friends get to the events on time."

The camaraderie goes beyond a warm welcome, especially when the winners are chosen, said Early.

"They all dap for each other, everyone of them," said Early.

Judith Heronema, an OSU Horseman's Association member and animal science pre-vet major, also volunteered.

Heronema worked as a spotter, assisting in case of an out-of-control horse or frightened contestant. She has worked at the Oklahoma Summer Olympic Games for the last two years as a member of the OSU Spirit Rider team.

"You get a different perspective of life when you work with them and help out," said Heronema. "It doesn't matter what time





they run or if they do it correctly. It's getting out there and doing it that's worth it. They may be competitive, but it's all in good fun."

Eleven other members of the OSU Horseman's Association volunteered, as well as six members of the OSU Rodeo Team.

OSU has had a long history with Special Olympics Oklahoma, and the turnout of volunteers and departmental assistance is proof of that relationship.

"OSU's equestrian team, rodeo team, animal science department and OSU College of Veterinary Medicine have all played a significant role in helping Special Olympics develop the equestrian program," said John Seals, Special Olympics Oklahoma area services and support director.

"We have our summer games here and have for almost 20 years," said Hockett. "I can guarantee you we would not have this program if it were not for OSU right now giving us the help, the facilities, the people and the knowledge they've offered. OSU is very good to Special Olympics Oklahoma."

Joy

According to Special Olympics, the organization empowers people with mental retardation to realize their full potential and develop skills through year-round sports training and competition. As a result, Special Olympics athletes become fulfilled and productive members of their families and the communities in which they live.

It is an experience that is energizing, healthy, skillful, welcoming and joyful, according to the organization.

"One of our themes has been 'Special Olympics: Training for Life,' and I think equestrian really shows that," said Seals. "When coaches like Larry [Casillas] train their athletes, they not only train the athlete how to ride the horse, but also how to take care of the horse. I think this program exemplifies the training for life motto."

Casillas agrees.

"I think it challenges the athletes," he said. "They are dedicated, and they work hard. It's rewarding to see when they do a good job."

Being a part of Special Olympics Oklahoma has given many individuals a new perspective on life.

"When you look at our athletes and what they have to overcome just to get up in the morning and get going, no matter what their level of ability, they're positive," said Hockett. "They don't complain or gripe."

"They have a great sense of humor; they're fun and loving. It truly is a real joy. You're working with people who truly appreciate what you're doing."

Volunteers and family members agree "Training for Life" applies to those who assist and compete in Special Olympics.

"They're happy about life," said Hockett. "They live life in the moment and enjoy it so much, and you can't help but enjoy the same things when you're with them."

Top: Heather Sossamon, left, and Stephen Harvey, Bixby, Okla.; Middle: Michael Herring, Vinita, Okla.; and Bottom: Bob Hartley, Vinita, Okla. (Photos by Rachel Johnson and Melissa Majors)

Susan Sossamon agreed the joy of Special Olympics has overflowed into her role as a parent and a friend.

"Heather has made me a better parent," she said. "She is not only my daughter, she is my best friend."

Four simple words have more value than the medals they are etched upon.

"Because in Special Olympics," said Susan Sossamon, "everybody wins." ♦ By Rachel Johnson, Elmore City, Okla.; and Melissa Majors, Sutton, Neb.

For more information about Special Olympics Oklahoma or the equestrian program, call (800) 722-9004 or contact Seals at john@sook.org or Hockett at teri@sook.org.

