



Special Olympics National Summer Games

With a fanfare of pipe bands, Asian dancers, the group Beautiful South, Caribbean carnival super-sized creatures, Soli the Lion, Prime Minister Gordon Brown and his wife Sarah, Lion Tim Shriver (son of Eunice Kennedy Shriver) and a pyrotechnic display the Special Olympics GB 2009 National Summer Games got off to a spectacular start!

The 2,500 athletes and their 1,200 coaches were cheered into the Walkers Stadium by family, friends, the people of Leicester and 1,500 volunteers. 140 of these volunteers were Lions from Leicestershire and Rutland clubs and 10 from Multi- District. Entering the Stadium, each athlete affirmed the Special Olympics oath of 'Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt' the blue print for the atmosphere of the games. American Lion Tim Shriver, gave an inspirational opening speech reinforcing the ideals of the Special Olympics and Lions Clubs International. His mother, who unfortunately passed away shortly after these games, was Eunice Kennedy Shriver, sister of President JF Kennedy. She founded the Special Olympics in 1968 with the aim to promote the idea that people with learning difficulties could achieve recognition and acceptance as an equal citizen in society. Believing that people with learning difficulties could – individually and collectively – achieve more than anyone thought possible, she worked enthusiastically to develop the games. Her inspiration came from the struggles of her own disabled sister Rosemary. The athletes and supporting crowd enjoyed the memorable opening ceremony in the warmth of the summers' evening. Their commitment, excitement and enthusiasm was almost tangible as they paraded around the stadium. Each athlete was prepared to commit themselves to a week of competition and also ready to enjoy an away from home experience, develop independence, make new friends and discover Leicester. Despite the appalling weather which, after the opening ceremony, developed into a stormy, rain- soaked week, the athletes were seen around the Olympic Village and each of the 21 sporting venues wearing smiles and enjoying every moment. These athletes were inspirational, showing exceptional commitment, encouraging each other and generating a sense of fulfilment and pleasure in everything they did – even though soaked through to the skin!!

To ensure the games ran smoothly 1,500 volunteers assisted in every aspect of the games ranging from the venue management, transport, stewarding to catering to hospitality.

Among the dedicated volunteers was a group of 24 Lions from Leicestershire and Rutland clubs and Multi – District. They were there to assist with the Lions Healthy Athlete Programme. Established in 1996 beginning with Opening Eyes, the programme is designed to improve athletes' health and fitness in order to enhance their ability to train and compete in the Special Olympics. The Healthy Athlete initiative is made up of seven disciplines including Fit Feet, Fun Fitness, Healthy Hearing Health Promotion, Opening Eyes, Medfest, and Special Smile.

Wearing bright orange polo shirts and caps displaying the Lions logo these Lions volunteers assisted in running the programme based in the Olympic Village. People with special needs have a 40% greater risk for health issues and general health care professionals are often not trained in or experienced with caring for people with learning difficulties. Free of charge, 1,288 athletes were screened during the week. The screenings educate the athletes on healthy lifestyle choices and identify problems that may need additional follow up. The Opening Eyes screened over 710 athletes dispensing more than 300 pairs of glasses together with 213 pairs of sunglasses. Two athletes were found to have urgent problems and were sent directly to the local hospital and 34 were referred to their GP.

Healthy Hearing managed to screen 1,025 individuals identifying a significant number who had identified hearing loss, some of whom required medical intervention and others who required hearing aids. Also advice and information was provided to help the athletes and their families to understand the various techniques connected with medical treatments and the value of such to the individuals. This was provided by specialists with experience of dealing with people with special needs in a relaxed environment with sufficient time to listen to and answer any questions and any concerns expressed.

The athletes enjoyed the 'fun' approach with staff and volunteers entering into the atmosphere using fancy dress and humour to engage the athletes in these serious screening processes. Athletes with high blood pressure, others with diabetes and one requiring dental referral were also identified through the screening. The athletes were very positive about the service and the volunteers felt it was a privilege and a humbling experience to work with the athletes and team of professionals.

One particularly memorable experience was one young athlete with Downs Syndrome. She had completed the heats for her event and was entered for the finals. She ran an excellent race but, as she passed through the ribbon to win the race, she fell and seriously injured her hands and knees. The medical staff advised that she had to go to hospital. She was distraught as she was placed on the stretcher to go to the local hospital. The ambulance attendant enquired if she was 'ok' and she adamantly replied 'NO!' as she wanted to get her winners medal. The ambulance staff proceeded to wheel her on the stretcher to the winners' podium where she received her gold medal and a huge ovation from the spectators. Once she held her medal she was happy to go off for treatment. This is just one of many stories displaying the tenacity and the commitment of the athletes.

The partnership of Lions Clubs International and Special Olympics manages to create a long lasting impact on the lives of the athletes, their families and their communities. This is possible because of the willingness of the local Lions clubs to lead the programme locally and activating the clubs support to work with partnerships for the health and benefit of the athletes.

A lasting image for me is of the Lions volunteers working in tandem with the specialist Healthy Eyes staff.....mopping out the tent when it was flooded with rain water! As always fulfilling the motto 'We Serve'.

My personal thanks to each Lion who volunteered to give up their time and helped to make this event such an incredible success and a memorable experience for everyone involved.

PDG Lion Steve Bird, SOGB 105E Lions Co-ordinator.

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- [Lions Clubs International Foundation](#)
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