

All the athletes are winners at Special Olympics Games

By Lucinda Dillon
Of the Emerald

It wasn't her first track meet, and it won't be her last, but Sharie Johnson had a nasty case of nerves as she prepared for her events June 14 at the 1986 Oregon Special Olympics summer competition.

"It's fun competing here with all of my friends, but yeah, I was real nervous," said Johnson, fingering two gold medals around her neck.

Johnson was one of 1,500 mentally and physically handicapped athletes who participated in the 14th annual Games at Hayward Field.

Because of excessive heat and rain, the two-day event drew a few less spectators and competitors than it has in the past, said Toni Kloch, director of Lane County Special Olympics. However, enthusiasm and encouragement ran high among the athletes and 300 volunteers involved in the meet.

The Special Olympics provides essential athletic and social involvement for the athletes, Kloch said.

"We advocate a main stream into society, and for some of these people, this is the only thing going for them," he said.

Kloch has been involved in Special Olympics for six years. "As far as athletics go, Special Olympics is it."

Overall, interest and involvement in the program has grown substantially, Kloch said. Next year, the event will be expanded to a three-day event with volleyball, swimming, soccer and gymnastics added to the roster, he said.

One reason for added excitement is the prospect of future competition in the 1987 International Olympic Games, which will bring athletes from 50 countries together. "People involved here who are medal winners will be eligible for the International Games in Notre Dame," said Kloch. Lane County will choose 36 athletes and nine coaches to attend the event.

But winning is not the objective of these races. Athletes are categorized by age and ability, and all participants are greeted with hugs and ribbons upon completion of their heats.

Denise Hunt, coach of The Other Ducks, can't say enough about her athletes. "They are the most honest, forthright people...the best friends you can ask for. They're more fun. They're easy to make smile. They're the kind of people I like to be around."

Dana Copeland, a member of

The Other Ducks, competed in the 100-meter run and the shot put. She credits Hunt and a group of seniors at Marist High School with her own successes. "They help us with running during track practice on Saturdays, and every year we win medals," Copeland said.

On the field, athletes blasted shouts of encouragement to teammates. "Hurry up Steve! Man, he's gonna catch you!" belted Glenn Forster to Steve Curran, who was busy in the 400-meter run. "That's my friend out there. He better hurry," Forster said.



Photo by Ross Martin

The first three to cross the finish line in Special Olympics events receive medals, and all participants receive ribbons and hugs.

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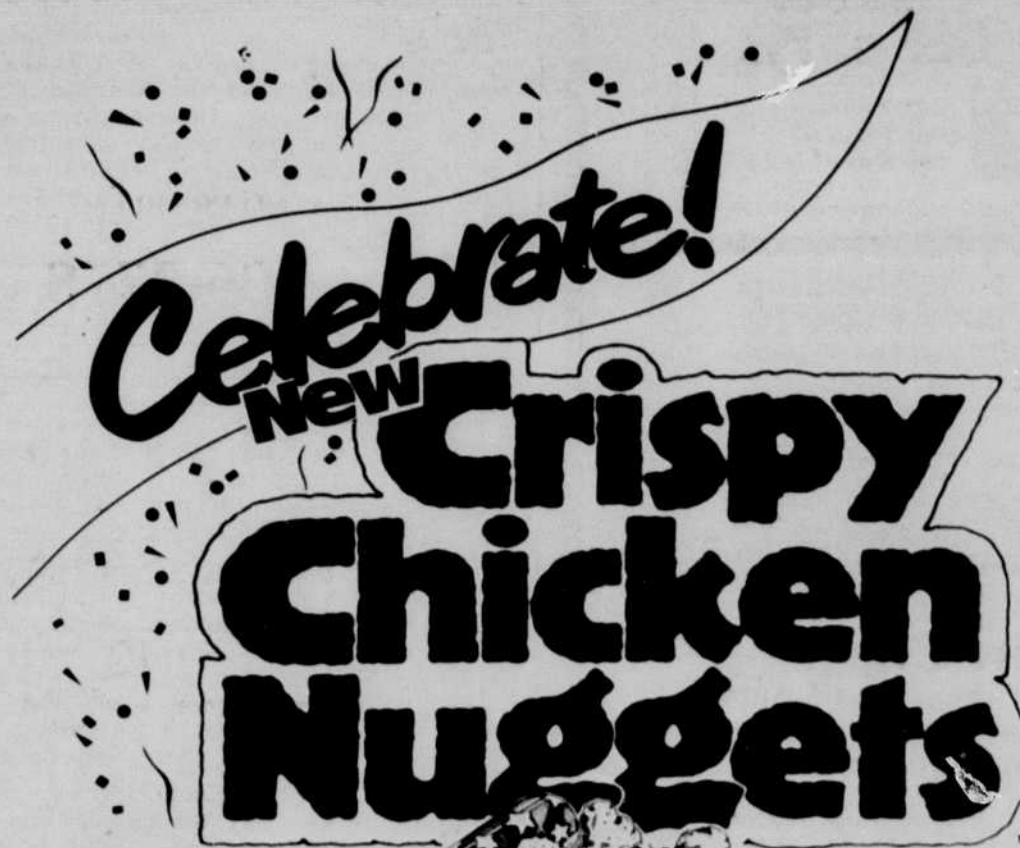
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