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SPECIAL OLYMPICS ROLLS ON WITH BOCCE



Mary Jones concentrates while preparing to throw a bocce ball during a recent Special Olympics practice at Kennison Field in Hermiston. Her doubles teammate, Annie Garza, looks on.

STAFF PHOTO BY TAMMY MALGESINI



Sally Nesselrodt follows through after throwing a bocce ball during a Special Olympics practice at Kennison Field in Hermiston.

STAFF PHOTO BY TAMMY MALGESINI

By **TAMMY MALGESINI**
COMMUNITY EDITOR

Excitement was in the air recently as Special Olympics athletes practiced bocce at Kennison Field in Hermiston.

It provided the athletes with an opportunity to get a feel for artificial turf in preparation for the Special Olympics Oregon Summer Games, which are in July at Oregon State University. Kristi Smalley, communications manager for Hermiston/Pendleton Special Olympics Local Program #510, said the playing surface makes a difference in how the ball rolls.

Sally Nesselrodt's smile was as bright as the red tank top and shorts she wore during the June 5 practice. The spry 81-year-old looped her arm through Shannon Raymond's as they made their way to the other end of the court. Raymond not only provides Nesselrodt with assistance, they are teammates as they compete in the Special Olympics Unified Sports. In addition to having fun and promoting physical health, the program brings people together as it pairs Special Olympians with athletes without intellectual disabilities to compete with other Unified Sports teams.

Bocce was added as part of the local Special Olympics training program in 2008. The sport, Smalley said, provided opportunities for some athletes who found participating in some of the activities were too demanding due to age, vision impairments or ambulation difficulties.

"It was a godsend for our athletes that have mobility issues," Smalley said.

On an adjacent bocce ball court, Lyall Arey, Jilli Smalley, Annie Garza and Mary Jones were attentive as head bocce coach Jessica Sexton gave direction. Jones also took on the role as a cheerleader, providing encouragement as others took turns throwing a bocce ball.

"Way to go Annie," Jones said to her doubles teammate.

And, it didn't matter

to Jones if it was a teammate or a competitor who was approaching the line, she called out words of encouragement.

"I love how positive and encouraging they are," Sexton said. "There's competition, but it's clearly friendly."

Misty Larsen, agreed, saying she likes competing with others. However, what she enjoys most is that it provides another opportunity for her to hang out with friends. She also serves as an athlete representative on the Special Olympics Council.

Lorraine Bance, who has worked with Larsen for 16 years through the Eastern Oregon Support Services Brokerage, said Larsen interacts well with others and likes reaching out to help her fellow athletes. Larsen, Bance said, takes her role very seriously.

"If an athlete has a dispute or a concern, Misty will report it in a meeting," she said.

Larsen has participated in Special Olympics for more than 20 years, both in Umatilla and Wasco counties. Bance said that involvement has contributed to Larsen's overall success and independence, including learning responsibilities and being organized.

Sexton first got involved with Special Olympics two years ago after Smalley shared about the program with Sexton's parents.

She started out coaching basketball. However, when Smalley found out Sexton was familiar with bocce, she recruited her as head coach for the sport.

A fifth grade teacher at Sunset Elementary School, Sexton is familiar with instructing others. While she didn't participate in competitive bocce, Sexton has experience with the game through playing with her friends.

"It's one of those things you keep learning as you go," she said.

For information about participating or volunteering with Special Olympics, call local program coordinator Angela Scheider at 541-314-0166.

As Special Olympics turns 50, local coaches look back

By **TAMMY MALGESINI**
COMMUNITY EDITOR

In its early years, the local Special Olympics program was all DIY.

"We decided that we could do a track meet here in Hermiston," said Mary Bousquet. "It was just a lot of people saying, 'Yeah, I'll do that.' People were always willing to support it."

Although not initially affiliated with the Oregon program, Bousquet and Doris Boatright rallied the effort during the 1982-83 school year. In the spring of 1983, more than 100 students from surrounding towns participated as Hermiston hosted its first Special Olympics track meet. They ordered generic ribbons from a catalog to award athletes, local students wore purple "Watch Hermiston Grow" T-shirts and Spike Pierson dressed up in an A & W bear suit for the event.

Special Olympics was founded 50 years ago by Eunice Kennedy Shriver, who strived to create opportunities for people like her sister, Rosemary, who had an intellectual disability. The idea grew from a summer day camp held in

Shriver's backyard. The first International Olympic Games were held in 1968 in Chicago, and state chapters had been forming in the years that followed.

Now in their 70s, Bousquet and Boatright, Hermiston High School class of 1958 graduates, are just as enthusiastic about what is now Hermiston/Pendleton Special Olympics Local Program #510.

Bousquet learned about the Special Olympics program as a first-year special education teacher in the Hermiston School District. In May 1979, she was told that students would be traveling to Eastern Oregon University to participate in a track meet. In preparation, Bousquet and others worked with students to practice track and field events.

The following year, she recruited Boatright as an assistant in the special education program. Along with her classroom duties, Boatright got involved with Special Olympics.

Evidently, Bousquet said, they ruffled some feathers with Oregon's Special Olympics program by organizing their own events and fundraising efforts. In the spring of 1984, an official with the state

office approached her in the school parking lot.

"I told him we had been trying to get ahold of Oregon Special Olympics. So, we break the law and they show up," Bousquet said with a chuckle.

Bousquet said he explained that any money raised by local Special Olympics programs needed to be deposited into the state fund. As a sanctioned program, the state office began providing official ribbons and other supports.

Nearly 40 years later, the program continues to grow — offering year-round sports training and competitions at no charge for athletes. More than 125 athletes participate each year — some in multiple sports — ranging from 97 in athletics (track and field) to 15 in both golf and bocce. Other current sports include basketball, powerlifting and bowling. In the fall, they will launch an aquatics program.

"I think it's wonderful because a lot of these athletes would never get the opportunity to participate in regular sports," Boatright said. "I think sports are wonderful for kids and adults. And that's why I'm still doing Special Olympics because I love it."



STAFF PHOTO BY E.J. HARRIS

(From Left) Special Olympians Jilli Smalley, Camron Goldie, coach Mary Bousquet, coach Doris Boatright and Misty Larsen.

Although Bousquet bowed out from coaching a few years ago, she still supports the program. In addition to the competitions and the health benefits of participation, she said the social aspect is just as important — especially for adult athletes who don't have school activities to connect with others.

"It isn't just sports ... it's to participate and have fun and to be able to socialize," Bousquet said. "We used to go to state and the dance was the most important thing."

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