

Special Olympics kick off in York Region



Aurora Special Olympian Mary Haberer lit the official torch of the Special Olympics Ontario Summer Games at Thursday night's Opening Ceremonies at the Ray Twinney Complex with York Regional Police Chief Eric Joliffe. (Auroran photo by Brock Weir)

By Brock Weir

Over 1,000 of Ontario's very best Special Olympians are descending on York Region this week for the 2013 Special Olympics Ontario Summer Games.

Aurora's own athletes, who will be taking on rivals from across the province from Thursday through Saturday in softball and soccer, were training hard and playing hard on the weekend, getting ready to tackle whatever comes their way.



Aurora will be well represented in the games not only by Mary, far left, but also by Adam Brookes, Isaac Charles, and Gregory Theriault.

Adam Brookes, Isaac Charles, Mary Haberer and Gregory Theriault are looking forward to welcoming their fellow Special Olympians onto their home turf.

All nine York Region municipalities will be participating in the games, hosting athletes and providing game venues. Many visiting athletes will stay in dorms at St. Andrew's College while their fields are handed over as the prime venue to determine Special Olympics soccer supremacy.

As the athletes begin to arrive Wednesday, events truly begin to get underway Thursday with the arrival of the Rob Plunkett Torch through York Region near Yonge Street and Davis Drive in Newmarket around 1 p.m. Athletes will be formally welcomed with special dinners at St. Andrew's, Seneca College's King Campus, and Richmond Hill's Sheraton Parkway, before all being cheered as they enter the formal opening ceremonies at Newmarket's Ray Twinney Complex at 7.30 p.m.

After coming back to Canada this winter from South Korea clutching silver medals after their strong showing at the Special Olympics World Winter Games, Isaac and Adam are gearing up for the softball championships while teammate Gregory is practicing his fancy footwork for soccer. All three, however, have their eyes on the gold.

Mary, a multi-sport Special Olympian both in the pool and on the field, will be showing off her skills on the softball diamond.

"I hope to hit a home run! I've been practicing," she says, adding she's working on a few surprises for her opponents.

Although their sports occasionally differ, getting out and promoting and supporting the games has been a shared passion for Aurora's four athletes. They came out to "paint the town red" in events across York Region building awareness of the games, spearheaded initiatives on their own, including a special fundraising barbecue Mary helped run at Superstore last month, and even providing simple and subtle hints to passers-by with eye-catching red shoelaces emblazoned with the Special Olympics logo.

And with that shared passion, they share the same dreams, and the same willingness to cheer each other on from their earliest days being involved in the program.

"We've come a long way, haven't we, Adam, from where we were in Ottawa," says Gregory, recalling their early practices and games with the Special Olympics before taking on the world.

The Special Olympics run on a four year cycle with Regional qualifiers taking place in Year One, followed by Provincials, Nationals, and finally the international matches in each successive year.

Four years ago, Gregory, Isaac, and Adam began their Winter Games journey as part of the Newmarket Ringers floor hockey team, coming out tops in the Region here at home, before progressing to Provincials in Ottawa, Nationals in Alberta, and eventually reaching the podium in South Korea.

"Every year things change," says Gregory. "Sometimes athletes decide they don't want to come back, and some new athletes come in, so it is about getting the big gel as everything goes on. You're going to meet new people, but without a certain part of the team gelling, you're not going to go very far. Three of us can attest to that.

"Back four years ago when the Regionals started for floor hockey, I don't think we ever expected to get to the worlds. Then it was baby step after baby step. After it was all over we were thanking the coaches, right, left and centre. We would never have been able to get that far without the coaches."

This week, with just hours ticking away to the games themselves, our athletes are getting in their practices where they can and getting some extra sleep to carry them through the challenge. All are looking forward to that exciting moment when they enter the arena to the cheers of their friends, family, and supporters.

Thursday's opening ceremonies are free, as are the games themselves. Soccer gets underway at St. Andrew's from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. this Friday, July 12, continuing at the same time on Saturday. Softball will be hosted at Richvale Community Centre on Friday at Saturday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. For a full schedule and roster of events, visit www.specialolympics2013games.com.