

Special Olympians carry torch with pride



By Jeff Doner

The 2013 Summer Special Olympics went off without a hitch in York Region this past weekend, with athletes from all over the province visiting to participate in a variety of events.

There's no doubt the games provided a lift to York Region, with strong friendship, camaraderie, sportsmanship and teamwork front and centre throughout the weekend.

The games officially opened on Thursday night as athletes were treated to a dinner and opening ceremonies.

St. Andrew's College in Aurora hosted the soccer tournament, welcoming over 230 players for tournament play throughout the weekend. Teams from all over Ontario took part, including teams from Toronto, Brampton, Vaughan, Barrie and as far away as Thunder Bay.

Even though Aurora didn't have its own soccer team, it was well represented by a cast of stellar athletes.

Playing soccer for the Barrie squad was Gregory Theriault, whose hard work and sportsmanship was welcomed by his teammates and coaches.

"He is just a pleasure to have on the team," said one of the Barrie coaches. "He is an amazing teammate and player and is integral to the team."

Also representing Aurora were Isaac Charles and Mary Haberer, who play softball for the Newmarket Challengers.

Haberer was lucky enough to carry the torch in the opening ceremonies on Thursday and said it was one of the most exciting times of her life.

"It felt so good," she said about the opening ceremonies with everyone cheering her on.

Haberer is no stranger to softball, as she has played roughly 14 years in the outfield and said the team had a blast playing at home in York Region.

"It was good, except we came in fourth place," she said. "But we still had fun. We were dancing on the baseball field before the game. We did the Gangnam style dance. It was so funny; my mom was laughing and crying."

Isaac Charles, a six-year veteran of the Special Olympics, also plays basketball and soccer.

In total, York Region welcomed over 1,000 athletes, making it the largest provincial games yet.

The athletes competed in softball, soccer, rhythmic gymnastics, golf and track and field, with each sport being held at different venues across the region.

Athletes show dance moves at Closing Ceremonies

On Saturday night, over 1,000 athletes and 500 volunteers took to the Ray Twinney Complex in Newmarket to take part in the closing ceremonies where the athletes were celebrated before the event turned into an all out dance party.

Regional Chair Bill Fisch said the games were a resounding success.

"Over the last four days, York Region has been transformed," he said. "I'm so proud our community came together. Everyone here is a winner. I have never enjoyed myself so much."

Police Chief and co-chair Eric Jolliffe was equally proud of the Special Olympics and all the athletes.

"It's been a great three days here in York Region," he said to a raucous crowd. "The level of sportsmanship has been truly incredible. We have truly enjoyed being a part of these games. Athletes, you are truly inspiring."

York Regional Police hosted the event for the second time and officers joined civilian volunteers to make the event possible. CEO Special Olympics Ontario Glenn MacDonell praised York Region and the York Regional Police for their hard work.

"If the primary benefits of these games is only to be a fun-filled three day event, then we're doing something wrong. Not so this time, the people of York Region began planning a legacy for these games long before the games even started and we're the ones who are awarded for it.

"The Special Olympics will be stronger and our program will be bigger in York Region and across the province because of the vision of this region, this police service."

Two of Newmarket's athletes were given the honour of helping out with the closing ceremonies. Dana-Michelle Damiani carried out the torch and was amazed by the crowd.

"I was so happy to do it and we're all stars here now. I feel great," she said.

Her husband Ryan Damiani carried out the flag and was thankful to be able to take part.

"It feels really awesome," he said. "That was the first time I have done that, so it was really nice. The police were really nice; the whole crowd here was awesome. We couldn't have done it all without all the help."

Stouffville's Matthew Nighswander made an inspiring speech that roused the crowd before the dance party.

"I just feel privileged, because I've always wanted to do this in York Region and just making our dreams come true," he said after the ceremony. "It's amazing that they chose me to speak on everyone's behalf and when I heard the cheers I was very happy that they liked what they heard."

He was also proud of his home York Region for hosting such a great games.

"It was just amazing. Not just the competition, but just being able to say you're in your own backyard playing the game you love in the sun. We just tried our best."

Special Olympics Ontario is a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering individuals with intellectual disabilities to become

physically fit by offering year-round training and competition in 18 core sports.

More than 18,000 athletes in 1,700 clubs across the province reap the benefits of participating in Special Olympics, which include improved fitness levels, self-confidence, an opportunity to experience and succeed in sport and understand teamwork and leadership.

For results and more information, visit www..specialolympics2013games.com.