

Special Olympics Aurora marks milestone hosting golf qualifier



By Brock Weir

Canadians from coast to coast sat on the edge of their seats watching Toronto's Penny Oleksiak and King City's own Rosie MacLennan bring home the gold in Rio.

But as Rio continues to welcome the world, Aurora area Special Olympians are preparing to welcome their colleagues from the GTA next week on their next step to Provincial, National, and International Gold.

Special Olympics Aurora marks its tenth anniversary this year and coinciding with that important milestone, the organization is proud to host the Provincial Golf Qualifiers for Special Olympics Athletes from the Greater Toronto Area at Westview Golf Course on August 28.

"This qualifier is for athletes to compete to win a position in the 2017 Provincial Games taking place in Peel Region," said Theresa Buck of Special Olympics Aurora. "We are really excited about welcoming our fellow Special Olympics athletes, volunteers and their families to our beautiful community."

Shortly after the Rio Olympics conclude, the city will welcome the Paralympic Games, which brings together international athletes from 16 disability categories to compete in a number of sports. Paralympics, says Ms. Buck, are about "elite performance" in sport and this is what sets Special Olympics apart.

"Special Olympics welcomes all athletes with intellectual disabilities of all ability levels to train and compete in Olympic-type sports," she said, noting participants must have an intellectual disability, cognitive delay or developmental disability giving them functional limitations. "These sports are based on fair competition against others of similar ability."

"Special Olympics excellence is personal achievement, a reflection of reaching one's maximum potential, a goal to which everyone can aspire. Special Olympics Ontario is part of that global movement leading the world of sport for people with intellectual disabilities and is focused on leading a worldwide network of athletes of all ability levels who compete in sports while creating communities of leaders committed to inclusion, acceptance and dignity to all."

Special Olympics Aurora, which now boasts 95 registered athletes and over 70 registered volunteers, was founded in 2006 by a group from the Town's Master Ducks swim program who recognized the need for sports activities for individuals with intellectual disabilities and were looking for a way to give back.

From this start in the water, the Special Ducks have grown to participate at the Provincial and National Levels in 2012, 2014 and

2016, and have welcomed five additional sports under the Special Olympics Aurora umbrella including the Special Dunks basketball team in 2010, the Aurora Eagles Golf Team, which has made the Provincial, National and International games over the past three years, founded in 2011, the Aurora Grand Slams baseball team in 2012, the Aurora Rollers bocce team in 2014 and the Aurora Dazzlers rhythmic gymnastics team earlier this year.

“We are in transition from adding one new sport program a year to concentrating on our growth as we source key volunteers,” said Ms. Buck. “You might be asking yourself, what is Special Olympics Aurora going to bring to our community? Well, what's coming is Active Start: A program for children ages two to six with intellectual disabilities and will provide early instruction in basic motor skills. The children will experience play, which provides improvement in their physical, social and cognitive abilities.

“We are really excited to partner with the Town of Aurora to launch Active Start as part of the Town's latest sports programs this fall. The Town and staff who run the program with support of Special Olympics Ontario will train the facilitators, source the athletes and the equipment.”

Also on the horizon is a Fundamentals program for kids ages seven to 12 to introduce them to sport through walking, running, jumping and balancing, the fundamental supports for everyday activities, not to mention the Special Olympics. They are hoping to have that off the ground within a year of Active Start.

“We want to ensure families in Aurora know we are here,” concluded Ms. Buck. “We want to ensure that prospective volunteers know who we are, where we are and how they can help, and we want to ensure potential sponsors, donors, know who we are, that we are 100 per cent volunteer driven and we fundraise to cover our programs and volunteer training.”

For more information, including how to volunteer, visit aurora.specialolympicsontario.ca.