



Special Olympics Connecticut Newsletter

MARCH 2025

More than 700 Participants Make Winter Games Presented by Eversource Memorable





More than 700 athletes, Unified Sports® partners and coaches participated in our Winter Games presented by Eversource, March 1st and 2nd. Highlights from the weekend included competition in snowshoeing and cross-country skiing at Eversource, figure and speed skating at the International Skating Center of Connecticut, alpine skiing and snowboarding at Powder Ridge Mountain Park and Resort, floorball (new this year) at Pratt & Whitney and gymnastics at Farmington Valley Gymnastics and More.

Highlights also included Opening Ceremonies with emcees including Bob Maxon and Gabrielle Lucivero from NBC Connecticut and Renee DiNino from WFSB; awards ceremonies; the Saturday night dance and Healthy Athletes®.

Healthy Athletes offerings included dental screenings and oral health education at Eversource and performance and hydration stations at Pratt & Whitney.

Volunteers organized and helped run events from start to finish and support and involvement from the following sponsors made it all possible:

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Shepard Celebrated with Bud Meyers Award at Winter Games



Danielle Shepard is this year's recipient of the Bud Meyers Award. The Bud Meyers Award is presented annually to an outstanding Special Olympics Connecticut athlete who inspires us all by his or her sportsmanship and commitment to training for competition.

Danielle is a member of the Special Olympics Central Shoreline team who competes in snowshoeing. She has been involved in Special Olympics for more than 20 years and in addition to snowshoeing, participates in tennis, sailing, and volleyball.

Danielle is known for being a team player who always has a smile on her face and kind word for everyone she encounters, whether

it be a teammate or opponent. She's also dedicated to always doing her best - running her fastest, cheering the loudest and enthusiastically congratulating her teammates on their accomplishments.

"Danielle is an ideal athlete - always ready to compete and always showing good sportsmanship with a smile," says Special Olympics Central Shoreline Local Coordinator Ralph Genevese.

"Danielle brings so much energy and positivity to our team. She is always there with a compliment and is always interested in how her teammates are doing. I am truly happy to have her on our team and getting to see her every week is a treat," adds her coach, Chris Cerillo.

The Bud Meyers Award is named for one of Eversource's longtime volunteer snowmakers who continued to volunteer even after his retirement and relocation to Nebraska.

Danielle was presented the Award by Andy Ouellette, an Eversource employee and head volunteer snowmaker, during the Winter Games Opening Ceremony at Eversource.

An Interview with Troy Sundwall by Aedan Heffernan, SOCT Intern



Special Olympics Connecticut just welcomed a new CIAC liaison, Troy Sundwall! I interviewed Troy to get the scoop on how he joined Special Olympics and his experience with our organization.

At age fifteen, Troy witnessed a person with a disability being verbally assaulted by someone driving behind him while he was riding his bike. Everyone in town knew of this individual, so it was clear that the driver was from out of town.

Troy yelled at the driver and ran after the car from the sidewalk, telling the driver that he had no right to speak that way about someone with a disability. Thankfully, the individual wasn't affected by this comment and continued his bike ride. Troy stated that this moment sparked something

inside of him and he wanted to make a difference. He heard a radio ad about volunteering for Special Olympics a week later. Although he didn't know that much about the organization, he realized that it was the opportunity he was looking for.

Troy's first experience with Special Olympics was when he signed up with his mother to be a softball scorekeeper at the Unified Sports® Fall Festival in 2009 or 2010. He had never experienced a positive environment where people came together to celebrate the joy of sports before!

Because Troy was involved in competitive baseball, he was confused about the varying abilities of the athletes. He asked one of the volunteers "I don't mean to be rude, but some of the players don't seem to have disabilities. What's going on here?" That person replied "This is Unified Sports® - where people with and without disabilities play together."

After the Fall Festival, Troy got connected with the Local Programs in North Haven and Hamden/New Haven. Since then, he has had the pleasure of participating in different sports and has even had the chance to compete in the 2014 USA Games in Princeton, New Jersey. He was a partner in the Unified Triathlon with athlete Sean Bogart, who became one of his best friends. He then decided to pursue a career in Physical Education and Special Education and learn how to strive to be the best version of himself.

Troy has found that everything about working for and with Special Olympics has been rewarding. He feels that going to work every day with the goal of bringing joy, happiness, and involvement into people's lives has been extremely invigorating. Even though he loved being a teacher, his experiences with Special Olympics have been so fulfilling that he believes he has found the path he wants to follow for the rest of his career. Troy enjoys seeing the sportsmanship and camaraderie that comes from watching or participating in a day of games.

Troy believes that everyone needs to know about Special Olympics, especially young people still in school. He sees how many students have never heard of the organization or only know a small bit about it, so his role as the CIAC Liaison is a great way to spread awareness. His job entails helping students participating in Unified Sports transition to participating in Special Olympics' community based programs. Educating the youth about Special Olympics and our mission opens up so much potential for unforgettable experiences waiting to happen. It only takes one person to change someone's life for the better, and Special Olympics almost always has this effect. The earlier in life people experience it, the better.

Welcome to this organization, Troy! We look forward to seeing what you will accomplish in the coming months!

Extraordinary Departments Celebrated at LETR Kickoff Event





The annual Connecticut Law Enforcement Torch Run for Special Olympics Connecticut Kickoff event was held at Foxwoods Resort Casino on February 13th. During the event, officers from law enforcement departments who stood out as top fundraisers in 2024 and sponsors of the program were celebrated for their extraordinary efforts and dedication to bettering the lives of our athletes. Also, members of the Torch Run Council, including Co-Directors Chief Chris Chute and Sgt. Nikki Mordasiewicz and Athletes/Global Messengers Nick Sinacori and Raishaun Holloway were recognized and thanked. Athlete and Global Messenger Robin Batchelder was the keynote speaker and WFSB's Renee DiNino and Athlete and Global Messenger Brian Drexler were emcees.

It was announced that more than \$859,000 was raised through the extraordinary efforts of law enforcement officers across our state in 2024. Fundraisers included 35 Tip-A-Cop events that generated over \$179,000 in donations, including the legendary Branford Tip-A-Cop event which raised an incredible \$91,000.

Lieutenant Tim Bernier of the Guilford Police Department received the Hall of Fame Award and Foxwoods Resort Casino was presented with the Torch Run Council Award.

The top 10 fundraising departments in 2024 (to be listed on this year's Torch Run t-shirt) include:

1. Branford Police Department
2. Monroe Police Department
3. Brookfield Police Department
4. Canton Police Department
5. Connecticut State Police Central District Major Crime
6. Cheshire Police Department
7. Guilford Police Department
8. Avon Police Department
9. DMHAS Police Department
10. Waterbury Police Department

Sponsors of the Connecticut Law Enforcement Torch Run are:



Season's Penguin Plunge Series Starts at the Shoreline



Our annual Shoreline Penguin Plunge took place at Eastern Point Beach on March 2nd on a particularly frigid and windy day with temps in the negative numbers. However, the cold conditions didn't deter a shivering crowd from plunging to support our athletes and inclusion for people of all abilities. The event had more than 150 participants, raised over \$50,000, and generated a lot of joy.

Miss it? Fear not. You can dip your toes or dash into the chilly water at one of these upcoming Penguin Plunge events:

[Brookfield / March 22nd](#)

[Tolland / March 29th](#)

[Monroe / March 29th](#)

[Fairfield / April 5th](#)

[Do-It-Yourself Plunge / Through April](#)

[Mobile Penguin Plunge \(the Plunge that comes to you!\) / Through April](#)

Pre-registration is strongly encouraged - raise \$150 and get a Penguin Plunge hooded sweatshirt! Day-of-event registration will also be available and spectators are always welcome!

Noteworthy News



Twenty athletes and Unified Sports® partners from our Special Olympics Mystic-Ledyard local program participated in the Special Olympics North America Unified Bowling Tournament in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Bowlers from 21 US and Caribbean Special Olympics programs were represented at the event which took place on February 25th.



The Special Olympics - CIAC Unified Sports® version of March Madness is underway at middle schools and high schools across the state throughout March!

Schools hosting tournaments for Unified teams in and around their communities have included Berlin, Bloomfield, Brookfield, Bunnell, Cheshire, Derby, East Haven, Fairfield Ludlowe, Glastonbury, Maloney (Meriden), Norwich Free Academy, and Tolland High Schools; and Haddam Killingworth and Shelton Middle Schools. A high school Unified Sports® basketball tournament was even hosted by UConn at Gampel Pavilion on March 13th!

It's been a month jam-packed with action, spirit, and teamwork so far and it continues. Check out photos from the tournaments [here](#).

Did you know? Now through March 31st, you can shop at your local Price Chopper / Market 32 and choose to round up at the register to support Special Olympics



Global Messengers Justin Riker, Alicia Rostkowski and Jonathan Ciaglo joined SOCT's Sharon Rozum and Katie Dennett in representing Special Olympics Connecticut at the Henkel Employee Resource Fair. The athletes and staff members encouraged employees to volunteer at our Summer Games!



Members of the local Knights of Columbus organization presented SOCT President and CEO Mike Mason with a check for over \$2,000 to support our Special Olympics Naugatuck local program. The Knights of Columbus are a Year-Round Special Olympics Connecticut Partner Sponsor.

Free Resources to Care for Loved Ones

To show our appreciation for all you've done for Special Olympics Connecticut, we would like to offer you something in return. Something we hope will have a positive impact on you and your family. If you're like many people, creating or updating your will, trust and other important documents is something that often falls to the bottom of the to-do list. But planning can help you care for your loved ones and offer significant peace of mind. And it doesn't have to be complicated.

We hope our [free publications](#) will help you get started. Some of the information available includes:

- Considerations for taking care of a loved one with special needs, parents or elder family members
- Tips for choosing an executor
- Creating an Advance Care Directive
- Why you need a digital estate plan

You'll find a complete list of free publications [here](#).

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