



Special Olympics Connecticut Newsletter

JUNE 2025

Athletes Shine at Summer Games Presented by Pratt & Whitney



Summer Games presented by Pratt & Whitney had it all - more than 2,100 participants including athletes, Unified Sports® partners and coaches, competition with beat-the-buzzer endings and impressive scores, Healthy Athletes® offerings in six disciplines, our first-ever Health Fair, a fun-filled Olympic Town, a red, white, and blue-themed dance and spirited fans! It was all made possible through tremendous support from sponsors and volunteers.

A festive Opening Ceremony kicked off the event and SOCT contributing writer and Unified Sports® partner Aedan Heffernan shares his impressions:

Although I have been involved with Special Olympics Connecticut since middle school, I attended my first Summer Games this month. The Games were held at Southern Connecticut State University and although the weather wasn't the best, the energy of the athletes, volunteers, and spectators really made up for it!

The Opening Ceremony began with the Final Leg of the Law Enforcement Torch Run®. The crowd turned its attention to a few police motorcycles sounding their sirens as some police officers and SOCT athletes made their way to light the cauldron! While it was windy out, the flame soon became visible for everyone. A Black Hawk flew over the field as the cauldron was lit, further adding to the excitement of the beginning of the Summer Games!

After a few speeches, the National Anthem, and the Special Olympics athlete oath, a group of

paratroopers jumped out of a plane and landed onto the field! Everyone looked up to the sky and recorded on their phones as the skydivers completed their descent. Athletes from all over the state paraded around the field as the crowd went wild! After the Opening Ceremony was over, the band D'PEW played some funky music as almost all of the athletes danced the night away. What a great night!

It felt great to see so many familiar faces as well as meet new people. I'm glad that I got to see the Opening Ceremony in all its glory and look forward to attending more SOCT events!



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Healthy Athletes® Activities Featured at Summer Games



Expanded opportunities to enhance our athletes' health and wellness were offered at this year's Summer Games. A new Health Fair was introduced and held on Saturday at our soccer and tennis venue, Hamden Hall. The Fair offered Yoga, therapy dogs, health resources and nutrition education presented by Athlete and SOCT Board Member Kimberly Malan. The Health Fair drew more than 200 visitors including 152 athletes and 63 coaches, family members, and friends.

Healthy Athletes® Village, which operated both days of Summer Games at Southern Connecticut State University, offered free health screenings to athletes in six disciplines including Fit Feet, FUNfitness, Health Promotion, Healthy Hearing, Special Smiles and Opening Eyes which was last offered in 2019. Over 950 screenings were conducted in total, a 10% increase from 2024.

Officers Carry "Flame of Hope" Statewide During Torch Run



Three days, more than 2,000 participants, over 500 miles travelled, three rallies and a route lined with more than 1,200 Adopt-A-Mile signs - all demonstrated a commitment to our athletes and boosted awareness and understanding of what our organization is all about. This year's Law Enforcement Torch Run® made its mark and then culminated with the Final Leg and lighting of the cauldron during an energized and inspirational Summer Games Opening Ceremony. Sponsors of our year-round Law Enforcement Torch Run Program are Bearingstar Insurance, the Connecticut Elks Association and Whelen Engineering.



During our annual Unified Sports® Awards Banquet, athletes and Unified partners shared their outstanding essays about personal Unified Sports® experiences and the impact the program has had on their lives. Here are excerpts from their powerful essays:



"At the end of the tournament, I got a medal on my neck, and I was bursting with happiness." - Isabella Bjorne, Har-Bur Middle School



"After school on Thursdays, there's no place I'd rather be than in the gym with my amazing friends from Unified Sports®. It's a place where everyone can be themselves, have fun, and feel proud of what they're doing." - Michael Naughton, Jockey Hollow Middle School



"Unified Sports® has been one of the most influential activities I have had the privilege of participating in, shaping how I view and practice inclusion every day." - Corina Lowry, Guilford High School

"The positive effects of Unified Sports® have spilled over into other areas of my life. I was once very anxious about social gatherings, but I now look forward to our social events, like dances with my teammates." - Broden Warzecha, Norwich Free Academy

Sandweiss Named Chief Development Officer *by Public Relations Intern Mia Sansone*



Christin Sandweiss has joined the Special Olympics Connecticut staff as Chief Development Officer, where she will lead the organization's fundraising efforts.

Sandweiss prioritizes working for a cause she deeply cares about. The mission of SOCT—one of inclusivity and community—aligns with her values, and so drew her to the role. She looks forward to being a contributing member of the team and to making a lasting impact.

"My job is to get us all in the same boat, all rowing together," said Sandweiss. "I'm a team player, I'm all in." Sandweiss maintains a consistent mindset in her work, she refers to it as her "toolkit" of skills. She believes in building relationships through open and transparent communication, as well as loyalty to her team and the entity she serves.

"Each job presents a different kind of challenge, but if you're coming at it with that perspective, it's a good way to approach it," she said. "Those are my mantras, and that's who I am."

Sandweiss's career thus far has been focused on the field of development. She served for over 15 years at Yale University in various roles including as Senior Development Officer, Director of Communications and Development for Yale-China, and Head of the Inaugural Office & Welcome Center for former President Salovey. This was followed by 11 years at Edgehill Endowment Partners, an investment firm managing non-profits' endowments, as Director of Client Services.

Outside of Sandweiss's work, she is a people-person; she enjoys being social and getting to know others. Sandweiss has many interests, including tennis, traveling, gardening, reading, and spending time with her dog as well as being a die-hard "Pelotoner". Sandweiss's ambition for success, along with her passion for her work, ignites her drive to make a meaningful impact with Special Olympics.

Little, Klein Join SOCT's Athlete Leadership Team *By Mia Sansone, Public Relations Intern*



Wendi Little has been part of Special Olympics since she was eight years old. Since then, Little has made her mark on the program, participating in sports such as track and field, swimming, and now, race walking with her local program, Special Olympics Central Shoreline.

She also participated in the World Games in 1995, has been featured on a poster, and has done many interviews discussing her experience with the program.

Little is passionate about Special Olympics; her favorite part of it all is meeting new people—volunteers, coaches, spectators, anybody who is involved. Little also enjoys keeping her parents involved, since they are the ones who have stuck by her for her entire journey. She looks forward to using her position as a Global Messenger to educate people about Special Olympics as well as help individuals get involved in the program.

"I'm looking forward to talking to people about this position and leadership, I'm just so thrilled. [One thing I know is] you can't let people put you down."



Peter Klein has been an active member of Special Olympics Cheshire since 2012, when he saw a flyer in one of his high school classrooms recruiting people. Since then, he's been a flexible athlete, participating in a variety of sports including soccer, golf, softball, floor hockey, and his favorite, basketball.

His passion for Special Olympics has grown due to the support of his father, who has been there for his entire journey with Special Olympics, and the two now coach alongside one another.

Klein is passionate about bringing his Special Olympics Cheshire sports teams to success, whether that means winning or, more importantly, seeing the athletes have fun in the process. When it comes to being a Global Messenger, Klein looks forward to using this position to support the athletes.

Outside of Special Olympics, Klein works at SkyView Rehab and Nursing as a dietary nutrition specialist and enjoys doing photography. "I love to be a leader and advocate for other athletes," he says.

Noteworthy News



Teammates Lonne Braxton III and Nick Leitkowski were presented with the 2025 David Kelly Award during Summer Games by David's wife Paula, ESPN's Victoria Arlen, SOCT President Mike Mason, and Board Chair Charlie McLaughlin.

Braxton is a tennis player with the Special Olympics New London program who has been an athlete for more than two decades. He has won medals locally and at national games. He maintains a special bond and friendship with his Unified Sports® partner, Leitkowski.

The David Kelly Award honors Kelly, who was an ESPN employee and SOCT Board Member with a passion for tennis and Special Olympics Unified Sports®.



Volunteer Burdeen Camp was presented with the Golisano Foundation Award at Summer Games for her dedication to meeting the health needs of our athletes. Camp serves as Medical Director and coordinates the volunteer medical staff for our state games.



Volunteers from Pratt & Whitney and other companies and organizations who generously support SOCT with contributions of time and resources as Sponsors were honored and celebrated during a MVP luncheon at Summer Games.



At the Special Olympics Young Athletes® Day at Prospect Elementary School, budding athletes got active and connected with peers with basketballs and soccer balls, scooters, yoga, trampolines, and bubbles! The event was supported by a cheering squad comprised of 4th grade student volunteers.



To celebrate its grand opening, Jersey Mike's of West Hartford held a "donate-and-receive-a-free-sub" campaign to benefit SOCT. Athletes and staff members were there to say "thanks".

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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