

Teen Ranch a training venue for 2015 Team Canada athletes

By Tabitha Wells

Over two recent weekends, the Town of Orangeville and Caledon's Teen Ranch provided training facilities and accommodations for Team Canada athletes for the 2015 Special Olympics.

Two separate groups arrived to focus on team building and group training exercises to help prepare for the World Summer Games, to be held in Los Angeles next summer.

Mark Tewksbury, who was recently named the Special Olympics Team Canada 2015 Honourary Coach, said the movement, which began less than 50 years ago, and has been growing exponentially. The first Special Olympics Summer Games were held in 1968, with just two countries participating, Canada and the U.S.

Now, there are over 170 countries participating in the games, with over 4.2 million athletes receiving year-round training, Tewksbury explained. It's absolutely huge, and the level of our own athletes' athleticism is just amazing. The shape that they are in and how competitive they are is really incredible.

The idea for the Special Olympics came from Eunice Kennedy Shriver, a sister of President John F. Kennedy who had started a camp for children with intellectual disabilities because she was concerned they had nowhere to play. Shortly after, she became involved in the promotion of involvement in physical activity and competition opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities. It's hard to believe that 50 years ago, the idea of a person with an intellectual disability being physically active was a radical one, Tewksbury commented. It's so incredible to be part of a movement that is really coast-to-coast-coast, and is happening 365 days a year.

Tewksbury, a former Canadian Olympic swimmer and former host of Canadian documentary series, How It's Made, has been involved with the Special Olympics for a couple of decades and currently sits on the National Board of Directors for the Special Olympics.

We're working on defining the position of the honorary coach, he explained. But mainly, I work with the leaders and trainers closely, as it's kind of an inspirational role. We organize things monthly, especially starting in the New Year, to give athletes something to look forward to and an exciting way to count down to the games.

The athletes, who were split between separate training camps held at Teen Ranch, will all be competing in the 2015 Games, and were chosen through a qualifying competition in Vancouver this summer.

Out of the 30,000 plus athletes that participate in the year-round programs we host, we selected 156 through the competition to compete in the 2015 games, Tewksbury said. It's sort of the crème de la crème that are selected, much like the Olympic games. For the athletes, the experience is an incredible one, and while they have only been afforded such an honour for less than half a century, it has brought them into a world that helps them to live past their disabilities, and instead celebrate their abilities.

It's all about celebrating participation and bringing together the community, Tewksbury remarked. These programs are in communities that support them, and the way it brings families together is just amazing.

For those that are selected to represent Canada, the experience goes even farther. Not only does it celebrate the high levels of athleticism that they have achieved, but it provides them the opportunity to represent their country to the world.

They get to wear the Canadian tracksuit and represent their country, and they do it really, really proudly, Tewksbury observed. Of course it's about trying to have their best performances and competition, but it's also about having a fun time and really getting to be a part of that team.

Katie Saunders, an athlete from Alberta, will be participating in her third world games this year, and competing in summer sports for the first time at the Special Olympics.

It's been absolutely unbelievable representing Canada at the Games, she explained in an interview at Teen Ranch. Participating in the world championship is just such an incredible experience. I'm so excited to participate in the Summer Games this year.

While her first two appearances at the World Games, which included the 2009 Special Olympics in Idaho, and the 2013 Special Olympics Winter Games in South Korea, saw Saunders participate in the Speed Skating Category, she will be competing this year in track and field for the Summer Games.

There are a lot of training coaches at this camp that are skill specific, so they will work with the athletes in their individual sports, explained Tewksbury. This is a chance far enough out to help our athletes improve some of those skills and bring them back home to integrate into their pre-Games training programs.

Ryan Kneisz of Manitoba, another athlete who attended the Teen Ranch training camp, has been part of the Special Olympics programs for the past 19 years, and still finds himself speechless about participating.

‘It’s really not possible to define the experience of representing Canada at the Games,’ Kneisz commented. ‘It’s a feeling that you can’t really describe.’

He competes in a number of sports that span across both the Winter and Summer games including track and field, floor hockey, speed skating and basketball. At the age of 25, he has spent most of his life involved in the Special Olympics.

‘It’s been so amazing,’ he said. ‘You get the chance to stay fit, participating in sports you love and travel all over the place during your training and for competitions.’

Along with the camps, the athletes will go through a second round of camps in the spring to reinforce the training they’ve received. Following that, they will get together in more sport-specific groups and receive more focused training rather than the multi-disciplinary training of the previous camps.

While the 2015 Games are still eight months away, the excitement among the athletes at the Teen Ranch camps was high. Combined with getting to represent their countries, they will get to help in showing the world that they are not hindered by their disabilities, but rather flourish through their abilities.

‘It’s such a great thing to see sport bring this community together, and to see the joy and spirit of sport that it produces,’ said Tweksbury. ‘We really just want to reinforce that message, and focus on being part of this incredible, worldwide movement.’