A Winning Tradition

DUQUESNE ATHLETIC TRAINING STUDENTS OFFER SUPPORT THROUGH A PARTNERSHIP WITH SPECIAL OLYMPICS’ WINTER GAMES

By Mark C. Toth

Each winter, competitors from across Pennsylvania participate in the Special Olympics’ Winter Games, during which 350 athletes and 130 coaches take part in three days of exciting winter sports.

While the real stars of the games are the athletes, for 25 years a team of Duquesne athletic training students from the Rangos School of Health Sciences has stood ready behind the scenes as part of the competition’s medical team, providing physical support and encouragement for the participants. In January, 13 students traveled to Seven Springs Mountain Resort to assist and cheer on athletes as part of the 2018 games.

University involvement in the Winter Games dates to 1993, when Dr. Linda Platt Meyer, Ed.D.’00, former Duquesne associate professor of athletic training, established a partnership between Duquesne and Special Olympics Pennsylvania (SOPA). She created the model of coordinated medical care for the Winter Games, actively engaging Rangos students with physicians, athletic trainers, nurses and other health care professionals in one interdisciplinary medical team.

“We saw an incredible opportunity to have our students collaborate with individuals who were just as passionate about sports, competition and friendships as high school and college athletes are,” says Meyer. Since the beginning of this partnership, 150 Duquesne athletic training students have volunteered their time and skills to the event, under the supervision of Duquesne faculty and other area athletic trainers.

The medical team’s preparation starts six months in advance of the Winter Games, to give students and faculty time to establish medical volunteer needs, purchase necessary equipment, and develop emergency action plans.

“The Duquesne students’ work during the games is equally and vitally important,” explains Meyer. “They review the participating athletes’ medical histories, conduct evaluations for acute and chronic conditions or injuries, apply first aid skills as appropriate, and follow up with athlete progress over the course of the competition.”

Beginning in 2017, two Rangos athletic training program graduates, Ellen Wilson-Loaskie, HS’03, and Dr. Sarah Manspeaker, HS’01, took over Meyer’s role in coordinating Duquesne’s efforts with the Winter Games—a passing of the torch to ensure a memorable and valuable experience for Duquesne students and athletes alike.

“Watching the athletes succeed in their skills and
routines while knowing that they each had their own level of intellectual disability is a tremendous way to gain better perspective of what it means to achieve goals,” says Manspeaker, who is a faculty member of Rangos’ athletic training program and coordinates the volunteer efforts of the students to take part in this initiative.

For Wilson-Loaskie, it is also rewarding to interact with a population not typically represented within the athletic spectrum.

“I’m always proud to see the amount of professionalism and respect that Duquesne students display year in and year out,” she says. “They embrace inclusion for all athletes, take their work seriously—and make me proud to be a Duquesne alum.”

Two recent Rangos graduates who were part of the Winter Games medical teams, Ian Shadle, HS’15, and Colin Ketchel, HS’17, gained more than just first-hand experience in medical or first aid training—participating with SOPA allowed them to embody Duquesne’s mission of being in service to others, and grow both professionally and personally.

Shadle covered downhill skiing and snowshoeing as part of the first response team, providing immediate medical coverage and assessing the severity of injuries.

“From an athletic training standpoint, working with Special Olympics is unique because there are many challenges that occur, such as multiple disorders, communication difficulties or a different perception of pain. As a health care provider, it’s important to know your population and adjust your treatment to work best for each individual,” says Shadle. “At the Winter Games, I met so many wonderful athletes. Through their efforts, I witnessed adversity, bravery and pure desire to succeed. The athletes built genuine friendships with us, displayed incredible skills and, most importantly, had fun.”

Ketchel found his role as a motivator for the athletes allowed him to offer his best technical and interpersonal skills possible while on site—an experience not always available in the classroom:

“Duquesne teaches that we, as students, serve ourselves most effectively when we are in the service of others. This opportunity to work with a diverse population, lend a hand to members of our athletic community and strengthen our commitment to excellence as athletic trainers fits nicely with the University’s mission.”

“The Duquesne students have been a key cog in the operations of the Special Olympics’ Winter Games for a long time, and the professionalism, knowledge and enthusiasm that they bring to the event allow our athletes to compete at their highest level in a very safe environment,” says Mike Ermer, western competition director for SOPA. “The athletic training students truly improve the quality of the competition, while our athletes’ courage and sportsmanship have a lasting impact on the students. I am truly appreciative of the relationship between Special Olympics and Duquesne.”

Learn more: www.specialolympicspa.org