

Chicago's special kids helped by Special Olympics

Neil Milbert

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"I don't smoke or drink. I'm no dummy. I'm an athlete."

By Neil Milbert

THE SPEAKER, a handsome young man named Joseph, had just stepped out of the swimming pool at Welles Park.

Pride punctuated every word.

Truly, Joseph is an athlete.

A special athlete.

JOSEPH IS mentally handicapped. But, thanks to the Chicago Park District, he and 1,200 other mentally-handicapped men, women, and children have the opportunity to compete and even excel in athletics.

The crowning moment will come Aug. 7-11 when Chicago's finest special athletes will meet their counterparts from throughout the nation and three foreign countries in the Special Olympics at Mount Pleasant, Mich.

"We try to eliminate the words 'retarded' and 'mentally-handicapped,'" explains Pat Condon, guiding hand behind the Park District program. "When you work with these individuals every day you realize that 'special' is really the perfect word.

"**NO, MY WORK** isn't depressing. It's interesting and exciting and what's more it's fun. I feel as tho I've put a man on the moon when I see how they progress. It's a beautiful thing because for the most part their lives are so barren in the area of accomplishment.

Where Chicago plays

Eunice Kennedy Shriver once likened the mentally handicapped to the Lonesome End of Army football fame, that solitary figure stationed near the sidelines while his teammates huddled in the middle of the field. It is a striking simile. At home, in school, and in the community the mentally handicapped always seem to be near the sidelines. But just as the lonesome end was the hero of many football games, so also the mentally retarded have much to contribute. The Chicago Park District is deeply involved in providing ways and means for them to contribute. This final installment in a series on the Chicago Park District is an intimate study of Chicago "special teams."

"The most important thing is to offer mentally-handicapped children and adults the opportunity to do everything that normal people do in the course of their lives."

In 1973, Mrs. Condon conducted a survey of the Special Olympics in Illinois and compiled her findings in a booklet entitled "Every Child a Winner."

The study was prompted by a mother's comment: "For me, the Olympics means that my Isabella is somewhere a

winner, not always on the side."

PAT FEELS this woman's words best describe what her work is all about.

The Park District program for mentally handicapped is only a decade old.

"It began as a pilot program and no one really knew what was going to happen," recalls Mrs. Condon. "It came to the attention of the Park District's Board of Commissioners that Dr. William Freeberg had been operating a day camp for the mentally handicapped at Southern Illinois University since 1953.

"A group of 10 instructors went to Carbondale to study their day camp and that's how our program originated.

"**WE DON'T HAVE** any age boundary. We have baby programs for 2- and 3-year-olds and we have people in their late 50s who are participating. The younger the better, tho.

"We have discovered that children can do a lot more than we thought at the outset. All they need is the opportunity.

"Usually, when an older child enters the program, he or she is sluggish. But that's only due to a lack of exercise. We start with slow games—like tossing the ball. We get the blood moving and the muscles gradually become more coordinated.

"From there we go on to the games like soccer, basketball, softball, and volleyball.

"**THE SPECIAL OLYMPICS** consist of track and field, swimming, gymnastics, volleyball, and basketball. In every way possible we try to emulate a real track meet.

"Everybody who competes gets a medal or ribbon of some kind. There's a feeling of togetherness and they know that just by competing they're going to get approval from their coaches, parents, teachers, and one another."

In addition to the psychological and physical compensations, there are intellectual rewards to be reaped by participants.

"Dr. Paul Dudley White (President Eisenhower's doctor) says that by bicycling, running, and swimming on a regular basis the stimulation of blood to the brain can improve the IQ by as many as five points," Pat points out.

"**WE'VE FOUND THAT** vocabularies and the ability to communicate increase tremendously thru participation in sports as a group.

"Sports are also a vehicle for them to grasp complex concepts. For them, more has always been better—more hamburger, more ice cream, more clothes, etc. But when they race and check their times, they come to realize that less can also be good."

One of the most dramatic success stories is that of David, declared "severely retarded" and "not able to be educated" by the chief psychologist of a Chicago research founda-

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Very special athletes in Park District program

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tion for mentally handicapped. "In our opinion, he will never be self-supporting," the report concluded.

David entered the Special Olympics program. He was overweight and it took him 2 minutes, 30 seconds to run 300 yards.

THREE YEARS LATER he was timed for the same event in 56 seconds.

Even more remarkable than his athletic achievement is his physical and mental development. He found work as an errand boy and has been working 40 hours a week for three years.

"I still train," he tells you. "I run home from the bus stop every night because I know I have to keep physically fit."

David is one of approximately 1,200 mentally handicapped who take part in the Park District program at 16 locations.

MRS. CONDON and such staff workers as Carol Albritton, Pat Sullivan, Joan O'Brien, and Marilyn Cook can go on for hours, reciting touching, true-life tales.

Like the story of Debbie, passed on by her mom:

"Debbie had a slight physical handicap along with the mental and for her to compete and bring home any small medal is something so exotic for her that she is left speechless and often tears come to her eyes. The whole block gave her a victory party last year even tho she didn't really win anything."

The late President Kennedy spoke of a society where "the strong are just and the weak secure."

UNFORTUNATELY, THAT ideal is buffeted and all too often swallowed by the current of contemporary American society.

But there are individuals like Joseph—stepping out of the Welles Park pool and proudly proclaiming himself "an athlete"—who enjoy security.

For he and many other mentally handicapped men, women and children the Park District program is a life preserver.