



2017 World Games Athlete Stories

Special Olympics





More than 2,700 athletes from 107 countries will compete at the 2017 Special Olympics World Winter Games in Austria. Here are just a few of their stories, covering the seven Special Olympics regions around the world.

AFRICA



DIABATE HADIDIAH, COTE D'IVOIRE, FLOORBALL

Diabate loves a challenge. That's how she became one of the few female judo athletes in Special Olympics Cote d'Ivoire – and one of the best. Now she is ready to lead Cote d'Ivoire's mostly female floorball team to their first World Games competition.

Diabate used to attend a special education school, but her parents can no longer afford to send her. So these days, she's learning all she can through her Special Olympics training, including communication and socialization skills. Her strength and stamina have surprised everyone, which is why her coach encouraged her to try the fast-paced team sport of floorball. Through sports, Diabate says she's found new skills and confidence, plus she's learned to communicate, cooperate and strategize with teammates. She's also gained more physical strength racing up and down the field.

The Cote d'Ivoire traditional floorball team has been training together for a year. The teammates are ready to take on Team Germany in their floorball first match-up in Austria. Diabate says, "My biggest dream is to return back home with the gold medal."



TEAM KENYA, FLOOR HOCKEY

Kenya's only competitors in the 2017 World Games know the odds are stacked against them. This mostly teenage team is taking on a sport very new to their village in Kenya: floor hockey. They have been training hard despite challenging training conditions and local skepticism that people with intellectual disabilities (ID) could play this team sport.

The athletes all come from Kinamba Special School in a village in the Great Rift Valley. Training was hard at first, due to a lack of equipment. They were able to play only with broomsticks and a cut-out tire for a puck. Their main practice area is a red dust field used for soccer; sometimes, they are allowed to use the concrete floor inside their dorm.

At first, some parents were reluctant for their students with ID to spend time on sports. But then the families saw the positive changes in the boys: more confidence, improved behavior and attitudes, plus newfound joy and pride after their first-real successes. That these "special" students will be representing their country has made them celebrities in their rural community, where the talents of people with ID are often overlooked.

The athletes know that most of the other floor hockey teams have more experience in this sport; surely, they'll have had better training equipment and playing fields. But this young Team Kenya is full of confidence and determination to bring home medals for their village, for their country – and for their continent.



ASIA PACIFIC



SHIKHA RANI, BHARAT/INDIA, FIGURE SKATING

When Shikha was born with multiple physical and intellectual disabilities, she needed urgent medical attention. The prospect of her care – along with the stigma – proved too much for her family, who sent her away to a residential care facility. But she had always hoped to see her parents again.

Shikha was born without fingers and toes, along with distinctive facial features. She learned to keep a distance from people and hide her face. Her life changed dramatically when she began training with Special Olympics. She gained confidence and learned new skills – and also enjoyed public approval and applause for the first time.

Even though she had trouble walking and keeping her balance, Shikha's coach saw that she simply needed encouragement and training. Balancing on her legs was difficult; but she didn't give up, no matter how often she fell. Holding a bocce ball without fingers was also challenging, but Shikha has mastered the art.

For figure skating, she began with four-wheeler skates and gradually worked her way up to inline wheel skates. Shikha is extremely dedicated to training – and says she is ready for international competition. Since mid-August, she has been doing 30 minutes of skating in the morning and 30 minutes in the evening. Shikha has also become an athlete leader and coach, teaching others the techniques that helped her so much in bocce and long jump. Her coach says these responsibilities have made her even more self-reliant and confident.

Most importantly, Shikha's family has seen her new successes. They have started to accept her and welcome her back into their home.



BRENTON HESTLHURST, AUSTRALIA, ALPINE SKIING

This last year has been a year of firsts for Brent: He was chosen to represent Australia for the first time at a Special Olympics World Winter Games and he welcomed his first child with his wife, Emily.

Brent and Emily are both Special Olympics athletes, who dated for many years. They were teammates during the 2013 Asia-Pacific Regional Games and married in 2014. Their success and life together is beyond what Brent's family could have imagined when he was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome at age 4. Though Emily won't be in Austria, she'll be cheering him from afar as best she can.

These may be Brent's first World Winter Games, but he's a multisport athlete who's competed on the world stage before – in the World Summer Games in 2003 and 2011. He is determined to bring back a Winter Games medal to show baby Daniel. "I'm proud to be representing my country at the highest level and I am going to do my best for my friends and family," says Brent. He adds, "I hope that others with disabilities get the opportunities I've been lucky enough to get."



EAST ASIA



LI XIANG, CHINA, SPEEDSKATING

In China, people with intellectual disabilities can face stigma from the moment of diagnosis. For decades, even the words for people with disabilities included a slur: *ascanfei ren*, literally “disabled garbage people.”

The parents of Li Xiang know this all too well. Their baby’s diagnosis of Down syndrome came like a bolt of lightning. “When I got the news, it was like everything collapsed,” recalls his mother. They found a ray of hope when Li was old enough to get involved in Special Olympics sports. Then, for the first time, his family began to see ways that Li could succeed.

Li had trouble with coordination and balance, and was also very sensitive to failure. But he kept trying and picking himself up again – and again. Li’s coach says, “sports are of enormous help” to him and motivate him to improve his skills. At age 11, Li was one of the youngest competitors at the 2015 Special Olympics World Summer Games. He won a gold medal, two silver and two bronze medals in artistic gymnastics. Now, at age 13, he will still be among the youngest competitors at World Games – taking on a completely new challenge: speedskating.



WONSANG CHO, KOREA, CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING

As a child, Wonsang had behavioral and other problems associated with his intellectual disability. Finally, his family found that sports calmed him and helped him find focus.

Now 25, he's an experienced athlete who's competed all around the world, including the 2013 Special Olympics World Winter Games in Korea, the 2012 International Paralympic Games in London, and the 2016 International Paralympic Games in Rio. He's also a world-class swimmer repeatedly ranked at No. 3 in the 200m freestyle.

Sports have also helped Wonsang learn to relate to others. He's even found a new calling as a very patient and gentle swimming instructor for people with disabilities. In the fall of 2016, Wonsang came to the United States to work with a wide range of swimmers with intellectual and other disabilities. He says sports are a powerful way to change public perceptions of the talents and abilities of people with ID. He saw this at the last World Winter Games in Korea, which brought a "huge change" in society's attitudes.

"People began to be more knowledgeable of intellectual disabilities and they were very impressed by our high quality performance during the World Games. It was a big moment because the way they looked at us has changed dramatically. I was really proud of who I am, and I felt one of the happiest moments in my life."

Wonsang won silver in the 2.5K cross-country skiing race and the 1K relay at the last World Winter Games in his home country of Korea. This time, in Austria, he's aiming for gold.



EASTERN EUROPE/EURASIA



AGNES AND RITA HINGYI, HUNGARY, FIGURE SKATING

At age 24, Agnes and Rita Hingyi are at the top of their game – and plan on staying there. The identical twins from Hungary won gold at the 2013 Special Olympics World Winter Games in PyeongChang, Korea. They are returning to defend their titles in Austria.

The Hingyi sisters are among the top-ranked skaters competing at the 2017 World Games. As Level V ranked athletes, they have mastered skating elements at several levels, including spin, spin combinations, advanced jumps and jump combinations. Their highly skilled routines have riveted the attention of audiences and judges alike.

In Austria, the twins will be facing stiff competition. Their close rivals from 2013 will be there, including Russian pairs Anastasia Shkiperova and Ruslan Talenov, who won bronze. Canada's Tim Goodacre, who won silver during last World Games competition will also be back, this time with a new skating partner to try for gold.

Agnes and Rita were teenagers when they competed at the 2005 World Winter Games in Nagano, Japan, and the 2009 World Winter Games in Idaho, USA, and have worked hard to build their skills through the years. Heading to their fourth World Winter Games, the Hingyi sisters have been focused and training for months to be the best in the world.



ARTEM SEROV, RUSSIA, SNOWSHOEING

Artem was a baby when his parents sent him to an orphanage after his diagnosis of cardiac problems and Down syndrome. He has also been attending a boarding school for children with severe disabilities near the Arctic Circle.

Eventually, Artem was introduced to sports. For the first time, he began to show great interest in physical activity. He also began to show great talent. Artem has taken on as many challenges as he was offered, including track and field, bocce and even dance. He's trained hard and takes special pride in all the medals he's won in his multisport competitions.

Once totally non-verbal, Artem has learned so much through sports and teamwork. He has learned to speak and make friends, even to hold a conversation. He has also regained strength and health. At the orphanage, he tells everyone that representing his country in the World Winter Games is the proudest moment of his life. At age 17, he says this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity shows the importance of believing in yourself and your dreams.



LATIN AMERICA



TEAM CUBA, UNIFIED FLOOR HOCKEY

Cuba is sending its first athletes to a Special Olympics World Winter Games in years. The all-male team is part of Cuba's growing Unified Sports program, which brings together athletes with and without intellectual disabilities.

The teammates are mostly in their mid-20s and come from all around Cuba. Their Unified Sports training has brought them together in ways they didn't expect, as they discover they are more alike than different. The Unified partners – players without intellectual disabilities – range in ages from 26 to 31 years old.

Cuba's team is being supported by the National Ministry of Education, among other local and provincial government supporters. The teammates already know who they'll face in their first game: the Unified Sports floor hockey team from China!



KENNETH RAMIREZ, COSTA RICA, SNOWSHOEING

Kenneth has always been a motivated athlete. But this year, he has even more reason to train hard. Kenneth and his family nearly lost everything when their house caught fire and burned down to the ground. Their losses included all the medals Kenneth had earned in Special Olympics competitions over the years.

The family lives in Tucurrique, a rural area located east of Central Valley in Costa Rica. Kenneth's mother said it's been a difficult time for everyone, but especially Kenneth: "The medals were his pride."

The 16-year-old also participates in athletics and bocce. But for many months, he has been training harder than ever for the World Winter Games. The goal is to start a new collection of medals with one from Austria. He says a World Games medal will have special meaning, signifying a new start and a hopeful future.



MIDDLE EAST/NORTH AFRICA



AHMED HAYEK, LEBANON, CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING

Outsiders sometimes forget that Lebanon is a mountainous country, where summits can top 10,000 feet. Winter is mild along the warm Mediterranean coast, but, in the snow-covered mountain region, the winter sports season gets busy by mid-December.

Ahmed hasn't been waiting for winter to start his training. As one of the youngest athletes going to World Games, he knows there will be tough competition in Austria. He's been working hard to develop his strength, skills and stamina. Only 11 years old, Ahmed can only imagine what kind of competitors he'll be facing.

Ahmed says he is dreaming of earning a gold medal to bring back to Lebanon. He can't stop talking to his friends, family and neighbors about this unbelievable opportunity. He can't wait to show the world what a child with intellectual disabilities can do!



RAYA AL HASANY, OMAN, SNOWSHOEING

For the first time, Special Olympics Oman is sending female athletes to the World Winter Games. This small team includes Raya, who is determined to make her country proud.

This is only the second time the Oman is taking part in World Winter Games. Training in winter sports can be challenging in Oman. For Raya, that means strapping on her snowshoes and running on the sand – a lot.

At age 27, Raya is the oldest member of Oman's four-person snowshoeing team. For years, she has been competing in summer sports, such as badminton, bowling and tennis. This year, she is ready for the new challenge of snowshoeing.

Though she's a little nervous about traveling far from home, Raya says Special Olympics coaches and volunteers have become a "second family" to her. She plans to show them all her new sports skills by winning a medal at the 2017 World Games.



NORTH AMERICA



DAINA SHILTS, USA (WISCONSIN), SNOWBOARDING

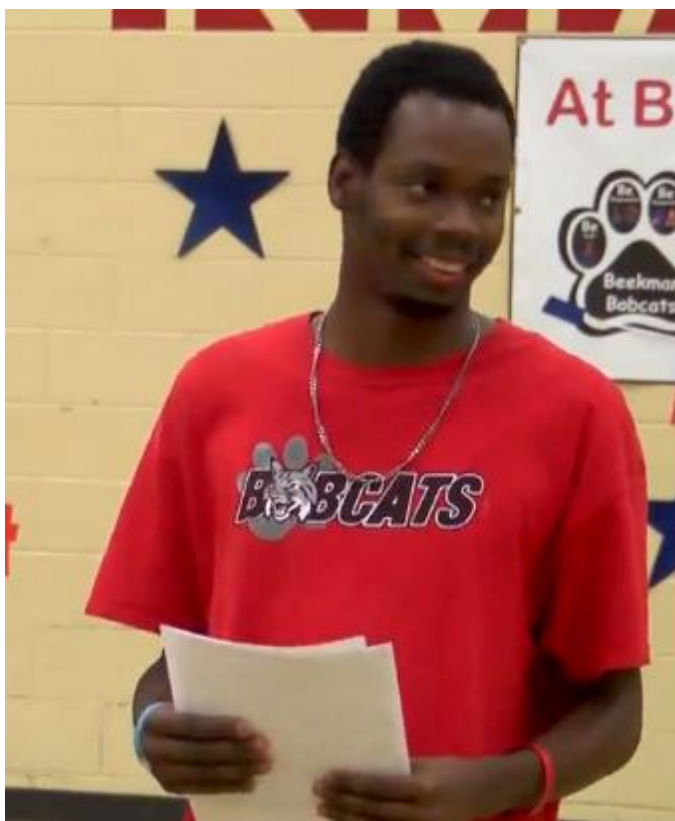
USA snowboarder Daina Shilts is an athlete leader who's as dynamic on the speaker's podium as she is on the slopes. She says, "Special Olympics has taught me –and other people – that it's okay to be different." In fact, she says "it's awesome" to be different.

As part of Special Olympics most of her life, Daina has seen up close how sports brings people together, especially through Unified Sports, which teams up people with and without intellectual disabilities.

Daina snowboarded to a bronze medal at her first World Winter Games in PyeongChang, Korea. She is also a veteran competitor at the X-Games in Aspen, Colo. There, she raced twice along with Olympic champion Hannah Teter for Unified Snowboarding in 2015 and 2016. They won silver and bronze in the dual slalom event. As Daina notes, they were the only females on the podium. "Girl power!," says Daina.

An advanced snowboarder, Daina is aiming for gold this year – both at the 2017 X-Games in Aspen and the 2017 World Games in Austria.

When she's not in training, 26-year-old Daina works for Wisconsin's Early Autism Project and also as a substitute teacher. She says sports have challenged her to try things she would never have done otherwise. She adds, "Sports have also helped me to decide my future goals in career choices – I want to help other children like I've been helped through Special Olympics."



NICK HILTON, USA (MICHIGAN), SNOWSHOEING

Nick was picked as a backup alternate for the 2017 Games, but would not stop believing that, somehow, he would make the final team. He's a student at the Beekman Center in Lansing, Mich., which serves students with intellectual and emotional impairments and also provides life skills and transition activities.

At 24, Nick is on track to receive a certificate of completion in 2018. This would be a huge accomplishment, not only because of what it will mean to him, but because of what it will mean to his mother. She works the overnight shift as a hospital custodian. They don't see each other much because by the time his mother comes home from work, Nick has left for school. She has always believed in Nick.

Then came the news that Nick had made the final World Games Snowshoeing team! The first thing he needed was a passport, but Nick wasn't able to provide proof of residency. They finally found a shutoff notice from the cable company. That was good enough. Nick is counting his blessings for this once-in-a-lifetime chance to shine on the world stage in Austria.

For more information on these and other 2017 World Games athlete stories, please contact Christy Weir at cweir@specialolympics.org