

## Swimmers tune-up for states

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November 21, 2010

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STRONGSVILLE NEWS

Sunday, November 21, 2010

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*Volunteers and City Club are key to success of Special Olympics meet held at Ehrnfelt*

By TERRY BRLAS  
Strongsville Post editor

There were a lot of smiling faces and congratulations passed about at the Ehrnfelt Recreation Center on Sunday, Nov. 14. The high-fives, handshakes and pats on the back were from fellow competitors at the Cleveland Area Special Olympics Aquatic Meet.

The 125 swimmers from eight teams were just as happy, if not happier, for the success of others in this tune-up for the state meet in Columbus at the McCorkle Aquatics Pavilion on The Ohio State campus, Dec. 18 and 19. Anyone who participated in this regional meet is eligible to compete at state.

This meet was average in regards to number of swimmers, according to Meet Director Jeff Vermillion, a native of Lima. He has been with Special Olympics of Ohio for 23 years and has a sister with Down syndrome.

"I was originally working in Columbus, but we opened an office in Greater Cleveland (North Royalton) 15 years ago



Photo by TERRY BRLAS

Hugs and congratulations abounded at the Cleveland Area Special Olympics Aquatics Meet at Strongsville's Ehrnfelt Recreation Center on Sunday, Nov. 14. Medals were given to the top three finishers in each heat with ribbons going to those finishing beyond third.

and made the move up here," he said. "Even though everyone who competes can move on to state we have to record their times so they can be matched up according to ability when they get there."

Swimmers that placed first to third in an event received medals and those outside of the top three received ribbons. There were 28 swimmers from Strongsville Special Olympics at the

Ehrnfelt Center this past weekend. Not all 28 will go to state for various reasons, according to Dana Martin, director of the local organization.

Special Olympic swimmers can begin competing at the age of 8, although the youngest competitor was 9. There is no upper age limit. The most seasoned swimmer at this meet was 41. Swimmers are grouped by age and entry times. The age groups are a bit wide in scope with 8 to 15, 16 to 21, et cetera.

Martin, a physical education teacher at Whitney Elementary School, is going to school at the present time to add an adaptive physical education endorsement to her license.

Barb Jarjisian, swim coach for the Strongsville Special Olympics team, coaches a broad range of age and ability levels. This is her first year with Strongsville, but she coached seven years with another organization.

"We have some that require a lot more assistance when they swim and some that don't," she said. "We amp them up a bit. We want them to get excited so they look forward to this meet. It's a diverse population. When we do an event we have to

look at all the ability levels to make sure we accommodate everyone, not just the high functioning ones."

Special Olympians have amazed Martin. She tells of one swimmer outside of Strongsville who competed with two prosthetic legs and a prosthetic arm.

"She just cruises through the water," Martin recalled.

The Strongsville City Club has been very good to Special Olympics with its financial and volunteer support.

"The City Club has been overwhelming with its support. We are very lucky," Martin said. "Other areas don't have that support and have to do a lot of fundraising. We have a great support system."

City Club members Bob Baxendale, Dave Jager and Bill Herzog were ever present handing out medals and awards at the swim meet. Bob Cappy, a City Club member who passed away two years ago, was the person who got the ball rolling in regards to the organization's involvement with Special Olympics.

"He was our conduit to Special Olympics," Jager said.

Strongsville Special Olympics is run entirely by volunteers. Parents provided food for the swimmers.

Eileen Buzzelli and Ellyn Smolko were two parents helping out with feeding the hungry athletes at this particular meet. Both have daughters who have been involved with Special Olympics for a number of years.

Buzzelli's daughter Teresa is 14 and has been a Special Olympian in a number of sports, including gymnastics and basketball since she was 8. Smolko's daughter Amy is 23 and has been competing since she was eight in a number of sports, including basketball and ice skating.

"This is a wonderful time. It's great to see the kids competing with their friends and their peers," Eileen said. "They're cheering each other on. That's the best part."

"Amy looks forward to all her practices and events. She works five days a week. Our weekends are as busy as ever and it's what we live for," Ellyn said. "States are fun for the kids because that's when you get to stay in the hotel."