



My Fitness Heptathlon Experience

Heather Thomas, Blair County Health and Fitness Coordinator



Hi, my name is Heather Thomas and I am a Health and Fitness Coordinator from Blair County. You may remember a few years back I submitted a story where I talked about how I not only dedicated a lot of time improving my own personal sport and health goals, but also those of my fellow athletes. This included one of my best friends who not only accomplished her health goals, but even beat me in Tennis at Summer Games!

Like many other athletes, during this lockdown I became a huge couch potato. Some days I just did not feel motivated to exercise with all in person activity suspended. However, that quickly changed last winter.

One of my coaches told me about the Fitness Heptathlon and I was kind of thinking, why do it? It can't replace the sports I love participating in. However, after thinking a little bit more about it, I decided to give it a try. To my surprise, it was a lot better than I initially expected. The Fitness Heptathlon

required athletes to select seven different exercises from three different categories. Some of the exercises I selected were the wall sits, step test, standing on one leg with eyes opened and closes, mountain climbers and my absolute favorite, planks!

I actually looked forward to the Zoom meetings that we had twice a week. While doing the exercises didn't completely fill the void the pandemic has left on me, I felt like I accomplished something each day physically and more than that, I also got to talk with people I hadn't spoken to in several months and they were truly inspiring.

To any athlete that didn't participate in the Winter Heptathlon, I hope you are participating in the summer one. Even if you're not, I encourage you to carve out 30-40 minutes at least two times a week to do some of the exercises that are a part of the [Fitness Heptathlon](#) or be creative and do your own favorite physical activity. It may not seem like it now, but just a little bit of physical activity each week can improve both your physical and mental wellbeing. It certainly did that for me!

Heather Thomas is a Health and Fitness Coordinator from Blair County and has been participating in Special Olympics for 15 years. Heather was a member of Team PA in Tennis at the 2014 USA Games in New Jersey. During the pandemic, Heather has also learned yoga, spent a lot of time hiking and has been taking online classes.

My Love Of Photography

Quinn Grimes, Area M Athlete



Hi, I'm Quinn Grimes. I am a Special Olympics Athlete in Area M. I grew up in Souderton PA (Montgomery County) and moved to Harrisburg last year. I am lucky to have many friends through all the sports I've done both in Montgomery County and Area M. I compete in Swimming, Basketball, Floor Hockey, Bocce, and Skiing. I have also attended SOPA Sports Camp since I was 16, so I have many friends in Special Olympics all over Pennsylvania. I did the SONA Stride challenge last year and the Heptathlon this year. Not only does Special Olympics help people with intellectual disabilities learn how to play sports, it sometimes can help them find other passions too. I'd like to share my story of how I find new and exciting ways to share with friends and be part of my new community.

A few years ago, my Dad gave me a camera that I could use on family vacations and trips. I really enjoy going places and seeing new things. I started taking pictures in places where we traveled. Some of my favorites are Longwood Gardens in Chester County and hiking trails in state parks. My parents really liked some of my pictures and helped me get them printed and framed.

With their help, I started making postcards out of my photos so I could share them with my friends. I stamp a special encouraging message on each one of them. Who doesn't like to get mail? Especially with a cool picture and a friendly message. My friends and family love my picture postcards so much, that the mailing list has grown to over 60 people now.

We live near Wildwood Park, which is a nature preserve in Harrisburg and a place we hike a lot. They have a photo contest each year and I entered two of my pictures there this year. It was exciting to enter my first contest. I didn't win any awards, but I was happy just to participate, getting my photos printed and prepared for the contest. It was super fun and I was proud to see them displayed in the Nature Center.

A group I joined call Club Café had an art show where I got a certificate of achievement for my picture. And I learned about another Art Show called Our Art/Our Voice where I entered three of my photos. They are now on display at Strawberry Square in Harrisburg, right next to the Capitol.

It was so cool to have my pictures on display so people can see the things I see. So I will keep entering contests and keep sending postcards with my photos.

Quinn Grimes is an athlete from Area M and has been participating in Special Olympics for 13 years. Quinn was selected as an alternate in alpine skiing for the 2022 Winter World Games. Outside of Special Olympics, in addition to photography, Quinn enjoys traveling, playing board/card games and learning many other new things.

Why You Should Get Vaccinated

Kelly Unangst, Southeastern Regional Input Council Representative



Prior to receiving the vaccine, I was concerned that it would take a long time for me to qualify since I originally did not fall into the 1A category. Also knowing I lived with someone who was extremely high risk, it was important that I get the vaccine to help keep others safe. Once I was given the opportunity to get the vaccine, I was so excited! This not only would help keep me and others safe, but it was one step closer to resuming in person sports at Special Olympics and other events.

When I went for my appointments, I was beyond excited and had no fear at all. I was given a few pages of information that I read over with my Mom that included what to expect IF you have any reaction to the shot, I also read prior to going to drink plenty of fluids. Some of the reactions could be a sore arm, headache, fever, or body aches. I did not experience any reactions to the shots other than a slightly sore arm and that did not stop me from doing my normal activities, like the Winter Heptathlon Challenge & virtual floor hockey. After you get the vaccine, you wait 15 minutes before leaving just to make sure you feel ok, the staff & nurses were excellent, putting everyone at ease. I received the moderna shot.

If anyone is afraid to get the vaccine, I would tell them “it’s ok, it doesn’t hurt, and it is important to be protected not just you but for others too.” Anyone who is still waiting to get the vaccine; I would tell them to just be patient. Each week more and more vaccines are becoming available at hospitals, pharmacies & clinics. In fact, the Philadelphia Eagles Autism Foundation partnered with Divine Providence Village to host a vaccination clinic at Lincoln Financial Field. I’m positive more vaccination clinics like this one will be happening too.

I cannot wait for SOPA to resume in-person sports with little or no restrictions, I have really missed Special Olympics and seeing my friends in person. I am very thankful for the virtual events that were offered and continue to be offered but there is nothing like being in person playing the sports you love and being with your teammates, coaches, and volunteers. I also look forward to resuming the yearly Leadership Conferences held by SOPA, resuming our county’s Athlete Leadership meetings in-person, and helping with in-person fund raising events.

Even though Special Olympics is not requiring athletes/coaches/volunteers to get the vaccine, it is very important that everyone get vaccinated to stay safe and save lives.

Kelly Unangst is the Southeastern Representative on the Regional Input Council and has been participating in Special Olympics for 10 years. Kelly is also a two-time graduate of Athlete Leadership University. Outside of Special Olympics, Kelly is proud of working for Telesystem, where she has worked the last 13 years.

My Best Friend Joe

Mark Graham, Montgomery County Athlete



My best friend Joe is being treated by doctors at Vanderbilt in Nashville, Tennessee. He has gone through a heart and liver transplant in November and he is starting physical therapy. He is a fighter like Superman. Joe and his family are all amazing people. Joe's family and friends are wearing team Joe Eitl shirts to cheer him on and back on his feet.

Joe and I play basketball and bocce ball along with floor hockey for Special Olympics Pennsylvania. Joe and I have been friends for thirty years. We met at elementary school and that's how we became best friends. He is my brother and also a honoree uncle of my nephews and niece. My superhero and my best man is Joe.

Mark Graham and Joe Eitl are athletes from Montgomery County and have been participating in Special Olympics for nearly 30 years. To learn how you can best support Joe and his family, visit the [#TeamJoeEitl](#) Facebook page.

Young Athletes, the Future of Special Olympics

Jordan Schubert, Manager of Athlete Leadership & Young Athletes



For those that know me well, you may know that next to sports, Star Wars is one of other biggest obsessions. I've watched every movie so many times I can basically act out every line from every scene from memory. One of my favorite lines is actually one you would least expect. It was from Episode II, in a scene where Obi-Wan walks in on Yoda training a group of younglings (children training to become Jedi) and Yoda says, "Truly wonderful the mind of a child is."

Why do I bring this up? It's because I say the same thing every time I see a Young Athletes exhibition take place. While it's fun to watch children play at these events, that's not all Young Athletes is.



If you're not familiar with Young Athletes, it's an inclusive sport and play program for children ages 2-7 with and without intellectual disabilities. That means it's also fully unified and it can take place within the community like the sports you participate in, within schools led by teachers and parents/guardians can also continue these activities at home at any time. Special Olympics International created an Activity Guide that contains hundreds of activities that Young Athletes programs can offer throughout the course of a season taking place 8+ weeks and there's no limit to how creative Young Athletes coaches can be in developing their curriculum.

You might think Young Athletes is something that Special Olympics just started recently. As hard as it is to believe though, it's actually been around for close to, if not more than 20 years! Children can start training in Special Olympics as early as 6 and begin competing once they turn 8. However, through the first 30+ years Special Olympics was around, there weren't many (if any at all) meaningful opportunities for really young children to develop their motor skills that would allow them to best prepare them once they were eligible to begin participating in the Olympic-Type sports we all love.

I developed a new Young Athletes volunteer training that gives a broad overview on what Young Athletes has to offer. This then allows the interested volunteer to decide how they want to move forward in starting their program. When they're ready, then it's my responsibility to listen to what their desired outcomes are and bring in the Local Program Manager and other necessary individuals to help identify ways to achieve these goals.

In addition to adding Young Athletes sites to Local Programs, another thing that's important to both myself and SOPA is exposing Young Athletes and their families to what Special Olympics has to offer beyond just Young Athletes. Before I even started managing Young Athletes, there actually had been an exhibition taking place at Fall Festival. This was actually first started by a group of Villanova students on the Fall Fest committee called the Athlete Involvement Committee.

While they had done quite well on their own, it was important for me to work with them because as committee members, their role should be planning the most fun experience possible for the Young Athletes. The reason I needed to step in and support them was to get the word out to not just our current Young Athletes participants and volunteers, but also other schools and community organizations to get them interested in wanting to start a Young Athletes site too.

That experience led me to want to host an exhibition at the Indoor Winter Games when it first started two years ago. Since I had to do most of the work on my own leading into the event, I was very fortunate to have someone in York that not only volunteered the first year, but also has a professional background of working with children of all abilities, Megan Bresnahan, who is also a proud graduate of West Chester University like me. While all of Megan's great work unfortunately didn't amount to anything last year, she still agreed to plan this year's event virtually. With Megan's creativity and ability to adapt these activities virtually, each of the participants really enjoyed their time!

Unfortunately, we haven't been able to offer any Young Athletes activities at Summer Games since there aren't any sites in and around Centre County. However, I have a few ideas in mind to change that, even if it's not the same type of exhibition that we host at Fall Fest or Indoor Winter Games.

Going back to what I said at the beginning, a child's mind is truly a wonderful thing. The best way we can grow Special Olympics is to expose children to it as early as possible. I know I would have benefitted from Young Athletes if I had the opportunity when I was younger as I'm sure many of you would agree. Special Olympics has given me much more than I could ever give back, however no amount of words can describe how great it feels to provide opportunities for the next generation of athletes. Next to having all COVID restrictions lifted, the thing I'm looking forward to the most is hearing a Global Messenger say, "I got started in Special Olympics through the Young Athletes program when I was just 2 years old!"

Jordan Schubert is Special Olympics Pennsylvania's Manager of Athlete Leadership & Young Athletes and has been participating in Special Olympics for 15 years. Jordan is also a proud graduate of West Chester University.

2021 Virtual Winter Games Athlete Input Survey Results

This past February and March, Special Olympics Pennsylvania offered its first Fitness Heptathlon to go along with virtual floor hockey skills challenges. This also coincided with the Polar Pop.

Athlete Input Survey Grading Formula:

- *Percentage of responses answering "excellent" plus half the percentage of responses answering "average".*
 - *Example: 80% Excellent + 20% Average ÷ 2 = 90% (A-)*

45 Responses

1. Have you competed at any state level winter event in-person?
 - a. Yes, I compete every year, if not, at least 3 times in the last 5 years before the pandemic-31%
 - b. Yes, however I have only competed once or twice in the last 5 years before the pandemic-16%
 - c. Yes, however I have not competed in more than 5 years before the pandemic-7%
 - d. I have not competed at any state level winter competition-47%
2. What sport did you train in for the Virtual Winter Games?
 - a. Fitness Heptathlon-73%
 - b. Floor Hockey Skills-11%
 - c. Both-16%
3. Promotion of Event via SOPA Website and Social Media:
 - a. 81% Excellent + 19% Average ÷ 2 = 91% (A-)
4. Opening Ceremonies:
 - a. 74% Excellent + 23% Average ÷ 2 = 86% (B)
 - i. 1 athlete answered "Poor".
5. Awards Ceremonies
 - a. 74% Excellent + 23% Average ÷ 2 = 86% (B)
 - i. 1 athlete answered "Poor"
 1. Instructions weren't clear on how to log on.
6. Additional Online Content (Olympic Village, Competition Highlights, Dance, etc.)
 - a. 75% Excellent + 21% Average ÷ 2 = 86% (B)
 - i. 1 athletes answered "Poor".
 1. Instructions weren't clear on how to log on.

Overall Grade:

87% (B)

Additional Comments:

- Much better than I expected.
- Better divisioning for Fitness Heptathlon (some athletes/teams were in divisions all by themselves and weren't challenged).
- Like that it tied in with Polar Pop.
- Missed the Parade of Athletes.

From Senior Competition Director, Bruce Bach:

Thank you athletes for completing the Virtual Winter Games Athlete Input Survey. It was great to see so many of you enjoyed the event and were able to participate. More importantly, you gave us honest feedback on areas where we can improve. After reviewing the survey, I expect us to more closely analyze the Fitness Heptathlon divisioning and provide clearer directions on how to view virtual events.

The Summer Games committee is hard at work crafting what Summer Games will look like and we hope to share that information shortly.

Important Notices

Jordan Schubert, Manager of Athlete Leadership & Young Athletes

Vaccine Education Page:

While SOPA is not requiring athletes and volunteers to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, it is highly encouraged that they do! A [vaccine education page](#) has been added to the SOPA website to provide information such as:

- Frequently Asked Questions
- Locations to get vaccinated
- Vaccine myths vs. facts
- And more!

2021 Leadership Conference Update:

As of the end of April, SOPA plans on hosting its annual Leadership Conference Saturday, August 28th-Sunday, August 29th at the Penn Stater and Conference Center in State College. Session details will be available soon.

If interested in attending, please talk with your Local Program Manager/Director.

New Athlete Leadership University Practicum Submissions:

All Athlete Leaders that have completed Athlete Representative I/II, Global Messenger I/II and/or Healthy Lifestyles will now be required to submit their practicums in SOPA's [online portal](#).

If you are having difficulties accessing your profile, please click "Trouble Logging In" where you will then receive log-in instructions.

Once logged in, please go to the "My Information" tab and select the report form of the practicum(s) you are currently working towards. Similar to previous paper and electronic report forms, you will be asked to provide as much detail as you can about the project you completed and approximately when you completed it.

If you have any other questions about the online portal, please contact vsyshelp@specialolympicspa.org.

Talk Show Auditions:

Special Olympics Pennsylvania is holding auditions for a brand new TALK SHOW set to launch later this Spring. And we want YOU to be the host!

These auditions are open to ANYONE in the Special Olympics Pennsylvania family as we'll be auditioning for one athlete and one volunteer/coach/Unified partner/etc. to co-host the show! For the audition, we'll be asking you to make a short video. The deadline to submit is May 10. Simply follow this link to get started: <https://forms.gle/ZqrPhvLuUqvGi4mr6>

Athlete Leadership Facebook Group:

Are you on Facebook and want to communicate more with your fellow athletes? Send a friend request to Jelsea Schrob to be added to SOPA's Athlete Leadership Facebook group. This group is a great way to interact with athletes, as well as receive the most up to date Athlete Leadership information. If you're not on Facebook, creating an account is quick, easy and free!

Email Address Update: I would like to be able to reach as many athletes as possible. If you haven't received any emails from me, or your email address has changed in the last year, please email me at jschubert@specialolympicspa.org.

Share Your Story: If you would like to share a story any Special Olympics experience, please e-mail me at jschubert@specialolympicspa.org by August 31st for a chance to have your story shared in Summer, 2021 Edition of SOAR. If you have submitted a story within the last year, before writing another story, I ask that you instead encourage your peers to share a story about their Special Olympics experiences so we can feature more athletes! You are then welcome to submit stories yourself for the End of 2021 Edition of SOAR!