

Counting Down the Days

How A New Hampshire Special Olympics Athlete is Getting Ready for Orlando

The 2022 Special Olympics USA Games are set to draw 5,500 athletes from around the country and the Caribbean to Orlando, Florida, for a week of sporting events that starts June 5. Eighty-two will travel from New Hampshire to be part of one of the biggest USA games ever. One of those dedicated athletes is Tori, who has been part of the Easterseals New Hampshire family for almost 30 years and now lives with an Easterseals care provider.

Tori has competed in skiing, bowling, soccer, and basketball in recent years and has now transitioned to track and field events. In June, she will compete in the 100-meter run, the mini javelin and the 4 x 100-meter relay as part of New Hampshire's largest team ever. Seven team members will travel with her and her coach from Barrington.



Tori on the job at Jersey Mike's Subs in Exeter, NH.

Tori's excitement bubbles over when she talks about participating in the games. One might think it was her first time competing, but the Special Olympics have been an integral part



Tori, right, reaches up to block a shot during a basketball game.

of Tori's life for over three decades. While in high school, Tori's mom and her gym teacher encouraged her to participate in the Exeter Special Olympics. "At first, I didn't want to do it," Tori says. "I was hesitant, but then I tried it, and I absolutely loved it. I've stuck with it for 35 years now."

"Tori has a great spirit about her," says her Special Olympics coach, Del Buker. "She is a lot of fun and I very much enjoy working with her." Since December, when teams were announced, Tori and her teammates have tracked their steps daily on their phones and their Fitbits. The Special Olympics' app monitors their fitness activities, and Tori is proud that she is

averaging over 10,000 steps per day. “Our team practices every Sunday with Coach Buker and I’m practicing a lot at home. I am very excited,” Tori says.

In addition to preparing for her athletic events, Tori is also getting ready to take on a leadership position at the games. She has accepted the role of Challenge Leader for her team. She learns about hydration, sun safety, exercise plans, and other strategies to help athletes prepare for the games. Once per month, she meets with athletes across the country via Zoom. Then she and Coach Buker collaborate with fitness captains locally to support New Hampshire’s athletes. “It’s a great way to motivate our team members,” says Buker. “And Tori has really embraced the role of leader.”

Tori’s bid for the 2022 Special Olympics has even spilled over into her day job. During the pandemic, Easterseals New Hampshire connected Tori to a job at Jersey Mike’s Subs in Exeter. What Tori didn’t know at the time was that Jersey Mike’s is a presenting partner of the 2022 Special Olympics. Some might call it fate.

The manager and staff at Jersey Mike’s Exeter location have been extremely supportive of Tori’s involvement in the Special Olympics USA Games. During the store’s Day of Giving, Tori’s store manager blew up her picture and hung it on the wall, and Easterseals promoted



Easterseals staff turned out to support Tori, center in blue apron, at Jersey Mike’s Day of Giving in March 2022.

Jersey Mike’s campaign to support Tori to help build excitement. Tori handed out cards about the Special Olympics and chatted with every incoming customer.

“Oh my god. I was ecstatically happy. I was crying and everything, but it was a happy cry,” Tori says. “I was telling people about what I was doing. They were asking a lot of questions. How many years have you been with Special Olympics, what did I like about it? It was a fun night.”

Tori is literally counting down the days until she leaves for Orlando. On the day of this interview, she announced there were “47 days left until I leave.” She is excited to hear the crowd, especially her father, who will be joining the festivities. She hopes to bring home a gold in one of her events.