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1,300 Special Olympians expected at Games

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By Coty Dolores Miranda
Special for The Republic | azcentral.com
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More than 1,300 athletes ages 8 through adult are competing in the Special Olympics Arizona Summer Games at Mesa Community College.

The Summer Games is the largest Special Olympics Arizona event.

With Olympic-style opening ceremonies at 7 p.m. Friday that included a parade of athletes and torch run, the Summer Games offers more than 24 individual and team sporting events, ranging from track and field to gymnastics to kayaking on Tempe Town Lake.

The Games, which continue through Saturday, are free to the athletes and spectators. More than 1,000 fans are expected at tonight's opening ceremonies.

And although the athletes are seeking medals and honors, coaches agree there's much more to this competition.

Tempe Special Olympics team coach Joe Micela, owner of Performance One Advanced Sports Training in Mesa, is bringing six competitors for bench press and dead lifting.

"It's not about them lifting weights and winning medals. There's a lot more involved for the athletes, like learning to follow commands. From a neurological standpoint, this is where they really gain," said Micela, who coached four-time weightlifting national champion Sarah Robles in the 2012 Olympics in London.

Two of his experienced athletes are seriously competing for records: Daniel Nemecek, 22, who at 130 pounds is looking to best his 110-pound bench press and 200-pound dead lift; and Matt Hebert, a Desert Vista High School senior who hopes to break his age/weight division record of 425 pounds in the dead lift today.

Eve Vance, head coach of a team called the Gilbert Roadrunners, has 122 young people competing in tennis and track and field events. Her program is Arizona's largest.

"They all want the gold, but sportsmanship is what's really important to me," said Vance, a Gilbert resident who has been involved with Special Olympics 18

years, the past five in Gilbert.

Vance said Gilbert Public Schools offers the Unified Sports Program, which partners typical high-school students with special-needs student athletes ages 8-21. The program is in conjunction with Special Olympics Arizona and the Arizona Interscholastic Association for the purpose of building a statewide unified sports system.

Thursday's track and field competitions included the TurboJav throw — a lightweight and shorter javelin developed by former world men's javelin champion Tom Petranoff.

Track and field competitions continue at 8:15 today with power lifting commencing at 8:30 a.m. in MCC's Heap Gymnasium. Kayaking competitions run from 8 a.m. to noon today on Tempe Town Lake.

Saturday provides more track and field competitions, including a 100-meter wheelchair race at 8 a.m.

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Wheelchair slaloms, assisted walks and the tennis-ball throw are all Saturday morning. Softball-throw and tennis competitions continue throughout the day. A closing celebration and victory dance end the festivities at 2 p.m. today.

Since 1975, Special Olympics Arizona's goal continues to empower the more than 180,000 Arizonans with intellectual disabilities to be healthy, productive, and respected members of society through year-round sports training, competitions, and support programs.

Information: SpecialOlympicsArizona.org.

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