

Something to smile about

By Darren Zary
The News-Optimist

The smile.

The Special Olympic smile.

As the torch was ignited to symbolically start the 1991 Special Olympics in North Battleford on Friday, the face of former Olympic gold medalist Michelle Cameron also lit up.

There's something very special about the Special Olympics. And Cameron would be the first to acknowledge it, too.

"Just look at them," said Cameron, pointing to a group of happy-go-lucky Special Olympians as the rain slowly drizzled down on Beaver Lions Stadium following the opening ceremonies.

"They're always smiling."

While Cameron helped open the Special Olympics, dark skies opened above Beaver Lions Stadium and rain spilled down.

For Cameron, it was sort of like diving into an Olympic-sized pool before one of her synchronized swimming routines.

Yes, she got a little wet.

So did the 180 athletes assembled on the field, as well as the dignitaries, law enforcement officers and everybody else in attendance.

But no one was complaining.

"I thought it was kind of neat

that it was raining during the opening ceremonies," mused Cameron, who was wrapped up in a down-filled jacket as she protected herself from the shivering chill that had swept through the ball park stadium.

"Did you see them out there?"

"They didn't mind."

No, not at all.

The spirit.

The Special Olympic spirit.

"Did you see them sing 'O, Canada' out there?" Cameron continued. "They were louder than everybody else. It didn't matter what key they were in or if they were singing the right note."

Yes, the Special Olympic spirit.

"The spirit of the games. That's what it's all about," concluded Cameron.

"The whole attitude here is different. The whole spirit of the games is exactly what sport is all about. It doesn't matter what the end-result is — they're rooting for everybody all the time. And they're smiling the whole time. It's so much fun for them, and it's so pure."

Yes, the purity.

The Special Olympic purity.

NO POLITICS

"There's no politics here. The negative things usually associated with competitive sports isn't here. Everyone here is basking



MICHELLE CAMERON

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for themselves and for their team. You can't help but smile when you see them."

Indeed, the Special Olympics are far removed from the Olympic Games, a model of achievement and excellence, but also a model that has been tarnished by rampant steroid use, elitism, terrorism and political boycotts.

When Pierre De Coubertin, the founder of the Modern Olympic movement, set out the objectives for the Olympic Games, he didn't not expect such political and social evils. The Special Olympics; however, have escaped that wrath.

Cameron, a gold medalist at the 1988 Olympics who will be

inducted into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame in October, was more than happy to be a special guest at the 1991 Saskatchewan Special Olympics, where the spirit of the games far outweighed the competition.

HOMECOMING

"My reason for coming here is twofold," explained Cameron.

"One, I literally grew up at Jackfish Lake over the summer time because my mom is from Jackfish Lake. Second of all, I just love doing work for Special Olympics. I've done stuff for them for a number of years now."

Sitting contently in a rain-free dugout at Beaver Lions Stadium, the 28-year-old Cameron was free

to discuss her life after synchronized swimming.

She retired after the 1988 Seoul Olympics where she had paired up with Carolyn Waldo to win a gold medal.

That accomplishment capped off an illustrious career in which Cameron was able to attain all attainable goals.

"We (Waldo and I) had gone to every international meet and attained all our goals," said Cameron. "We had won every competition we had entered. There were three world championships and all the European Open meets. The big one was the Olympics, the last one of the bunch."

While Waldo is busy endorsing her very own swimsuit-line, Cameron is enjoying a less glamorous role as a sports consultant.

STRIVING FOR BEST

"What am I doing these days? Well, I'm doing a lot of motivational development and training, team building and stuff like that. Basically, I'm free-lancing right now. I like taking the skills I've attained from swimming and apply them to others," she said.

Cameron, who has worked with corporations, continued by saying that "attaining a goal and striving for the best still applies."

Besides corporations, she has applied her sport consulting skills to various sports clubs and at sport camps.

And while she still remains active, Cameron now sits on the other end of the spectrum on the national scale as she serves on the board of directors of the Canadian Coaches Association.

Still, she remains an athlete.

"Right now, I'm training for the Honolulu marathon (to be held in December). I like to do all the land things now that I couldn't do when I was swimming. I feel like a little kid," Cameron said, smiling.

An Olympic smile, to be sure. A special one.