

Special times

By Darron Kloster
L-P Sports Writer

Norma and Mickey Linnell of Battleford had a powerful message for parents of mentally handicapped children.

And it was bringing tears to their eyes as they watched their son, Norman, compete in the Special Olympics Society's 17th annual Summer Games on Saturday at Douglas Park.

"Never underestimate the ability of your children," said Norma, her voice assured and brimming with pride. "Because the power and the will they possess comes from within. It's there, we just have to show our love and support to bring it out."

Mickey smiled, revealing a results sheet with Norman's four first-place finishes in shot put, long jump and 100- and 400-metre races.

"It's so simple, you know. Mentally handicapped people do better when they know you care for them. Just look around at all these smiling faces. It tells you there's a lot of people who care, more now than ever before."

Over 250 special athletes from eight provincial zones took part in the Games, which have been held annually since 1969. A spectrum of ages and abilities swam and pitched horseshoes, bowled and heaved shotputs, ran and kicked soccer balls. And while the competition was intense, the atmosphere was traditional: Special Olympians don't only show emotion in their own achievements, but willingly share in the accomplishments of others.

The game's main objective was as plain as the smile on Norman Linnell's face as he lifted his arms in victory after winning the 100-metre race. They provide the mentally handicapped with a chance to spread their wings and try. They bring the mentally handicapped out of society's shadows and into the sunshine with the chance to experience life.



"When we first entered Norman into these Games 10 years ago, we were skeptical," recalled Norma. "But (the Games) started something special in our son. We could see it right away. He finally had a real interest in something. He was so excited and would never stop talking about the races."

Norman, who just turned 22, is considered a premiere athlete by the Special Olympics Society. His physical and mental growth have been staggering during the last decade, amassing more red ribbons on the provincial, national and international scale than anyone else in the province.

Both Norma and Mickey attribute that success, as well as his social development, to Special Olympics functions such as the Games. But as Norman grows older and better they are finding he's just got to move on.

"He needs better competition," said Norma. "He belongs to the Legion Track and Field Club in North Battleford now and he attends a few meets with them. I think this might be his last Special Olympics meet, though. It's sad for all of us not to have him competing, but we are happy because of what the Games have given him."

Special Olympics has been some what of a family affair for the Linnells. Norman does the competing while Mickey and Norma operate stop watches, measure distances and help out wherever they can. Mickey has been an executive member with the society for several years and Norma has worked within Zone 7 (which includes Battleford) since the early 70s.

"We will probably continue helping," said Mickey. "We owe Special Olympics a lot. Norman has a good job now and he's happy. Special Olympics gave him the start in track and now he plays badminton with the (North Battleford Badminton) club, he bowls and curls and gets along with everyone."

Norman will become the first Saskatchewan Special Olympian to enter the pentathlon event at the national Special Olympics championships in Calgary from July 15-19. From there, he will bid farewell to Special Olympics and continue competing at the recreational level with the Legion track club.



Leader-Post photo by Robert Watson

Betty Zboril pushes for the finish line