

Special Olympics: 'Happy and excited' athletes earn medals at Seven Springs

By KECIA BAL

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CHAMPION – Whether it was a gold medal or an eighth-place ribbon, each winner Tuesday sparked the same response from the crowd at closing ceremonies for the Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games: enthusiastic applause and heartfelt cheers.

The games concluded at Seven Springs Mountain Resort, where winners were recognized and athletes recalled their best moments of the event.

Kyrin Harris-Jackson of Harrisburg said he was thrilled to win a gold medal during his first time competing in the games.

"I feel happy and excited to win this medal for the very first time in my life," he said.

Before the event was over, the 17-year-old had three gold medals for his skiing skills to take home.

Athlete Jerome Johnson of Erie City has competed in summer, winter and fall Special Olympics since the 27-year-old was in grade school, but the excitement never wears off, he said.

Even before the medals were announced, he said he had peeked at the list and discovered he was a first-place winner in his Alpine skiing division.

"It doesn't matter what hill it is," he said, with a confident smile. "I'll get on it."

Pittsburgh volunteer Andrew Moschetta – known by his nickname "Pickle" – said he's been helping with Special Olympics events since 1992, when he was in high school.

This year, he helped coordinate entry-level competitions and coach athletes. He also spends a full week in the summer at a Special Olympics camp.



Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games

Noel Alston and Kyrin Harris-Jackson, both of Area M (Dauphin, Cumberland, Perry and northern York counties), on the awards stage. Noel took silver and Kyrin won three gold medals in alpine skiing during the Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games on Tuesday, Feb. 10, 2015, at Seven Springs Mountain Resort.

Even with his own small business to run and an 18-month-old son at home, he still makes time for the big events.

"I feel like it's the right thing to do," he said. "I was brought up that way. It recharges my batteries, restores my faith in humanity. This is sportsmanship at in its absolute truest level."

Organizers were able to offer snowshoeing, which was cancelled Monday because wet weather made for slushy courses, early Tuesday, so the athletes who came to compete had their chance on the snow, according to Mike Ermer, the state organization's competition director for the western region.

Some cross-country events were moved to better locations, but all the planned events were held, thanks to Seven Springs staff and quick-acting volunteers and coaches, he said.

"It was all very synergistic," he said.

The games were headquartered at the resort for the first time this year.

"The feedback has been wonderful," Ermer said, adding that he thinks it makes sense to do the same next year.