

Special Olympics: Skiers hit the slopes; 'I might win gold'

By KECIA BAL

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CHAMPION – For more than 20 years, 42-year-old Brian Miller of Somerset has skied in Special Olympics.

Putting on his gear at Seven Springs Mountain Resort on Monday, he was optimistic about his chances of adding to his collection of medals that hang on a wall at home.

"I feel pretty good," he said. "I might win gold today."

Stepping up to the starting line for a 7.5 kilometer cross country race, Miller's confidence hadn't waned.

"I'm just thinking about pushing myself harder," he said.

His grit paid off, with another silver medal for his division.

Foggy weather and warmer-than-usual temperatures made for challenges for Special Olympics athletes on Monday – but the hundreds of participants were making the best of the day anyway.

Monday was the first of two days of competition for Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games, with the Nordic (skiing and related) events at the resort.

Organizers cancelled snowshoe events because wet terrain could have made for dangerous conditions. They may be held Tuesday instead for the nearly 200 athletes who were set to compete in the sport, according to Mindy Leonard, a Richland Township resident and the snowshoe competition coordinator.

"It was just slushed over," she said. "We were almost knee-deep in water."



Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games

Quinn Grimes, 19, of Montgomery County, heads to the slopes for the skiing competition Monday, Feb. 9, 2015, during the Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games at Seven Springs Mountain Resort.

Resort staff members were working with organizers Monday to look at alternate courses, too, she said, because she knows the athletes are eager to show their skills.

The retired health and physical education teacher said she started volunteering with Special Olympics two years ago as her new hobby.

"It's amazing to see how excited the athletes get," she said. "Then, to watch them compete is so rewarding. And you get to work with the most caring, giving people."

Alex Brouwers, a 24-year-old athlete from Montgomery County, Maryland, said his 10-year run as a skier in Special Olympics has helped him accomplish important goals.

"Over the years, my stamina has really gone up," he said.

He's also proud of his discipline, he said.

"I really get a lot of exercise preparing for these," said Brouwers, who took first place for his division in the 7.5 kilometer cross-country race.

Eventually, he would like to become an assistant coach, he said, because he appreciates the guidance he has received and he would enjoy a leadership role.

Athlete Rusty Lomax' favorite part of the annual games is just meeting new people and catching up with old friends, he said, standing near the starting line to cheer for fellow athletes competing in cross-country.

"I enjoy talking to people," he said, "new friends, new faces."