

Special Olympics: 'Nothing but happiness' at figure-skating venue

By Kelly Urban

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The skates were sharpened and laces were tied – meaning it was time to compete.

As the Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games opened in the area on Monday, 27 figure skaters took to the ice at the Cambria County War Memorial Arena, trying their best to secure a place in the finals.

Frannie Findley, venue coordinator for figure skating, said this year's competition offers athletes the chance to perform solo or in pairs - and experience ice dancing at various levels depending on ability.

"They're competing for those gold, silver and bronze medals and they love it," she said. "It's wonderful because they give the best they can and help each other and cheer on the other athletes, even though they are competing against each other."

Athletes range in age from nine to 62.

"There's nothing but happiness and they all exude love," Findley said.

Darlene Laurent, 46, from Virginia Beach, Virginia, has been competing in the games since 1986, and originally started out as a speed-skater.

"I switched to figure skating because I wanted to try something different," she said. "I found out I was good at it and I wanted to continue."

Laurent has participated in more games than she can count and has won numerous medals. But a trip to Alaska in 2001 to participate in the Special Olympics World Winter Games ranks up there as one of her highlights.



Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games

Jacob Yelnosky, 22, of Maryland takes a bow after his performance Monday, Feb. 9, 2015, during the figure-skating competition in the Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games at the Cambria County War Memorial Arena in Johnstown.

"I enjoy being around my friends and socializing; I just enjoy it all," she said.

Loretta Claiborne has been figure skating since the '80s and now competes solo and with pairs partner Dave Kline.

"Special Olympics gives you an opportunity to be on a team and belong and allows you to be your best," the 61-year-old York resident said. "That's something I never had when I was younger. Special Olympics changed my life."

Claiborne starts practicing in early November and increases her ice time leading up to the games.

She also had the opportunity to represent the country in 2005 when she was chosen to attend the Special Olympics Winter World Games in Japan.

"Focus on your ability, not inability," Claiborne said.

Bethlehem resident Joni Talavera has been figure-skating for 11 years and this year she's also trying her hand at ice-dancing.

"I like to learn new things and dance is new for me," the 33-year-old said. "I also get to see my friends who I haven't seen in a while."

Other events held Monday included speed skating at Planet Ice and alpine and cross-country skiing and snowshoeing at Seven Springs Mountain Resort.

The games will conclude Tuesday with awards and closing ceremonies.