

## 2015 Special Olympics open at Seven Springs

BY KECIA BAL

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Seven Springs Mountain Resort was a flurry of activity Sunday night — with athletes, coaches and organizers cheering, region-by-region, for the start of the 2015 Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games.

The night wrapped up with a torch ceremony that started at the top of the mountain. Members of the Seven Springs ski patrol and ski instructors skied into a seven-shape, carrying torches, and eventually brought the official torch to Mark Suman, an athlete with the Westmoreland County delegation, who stepped up to the Special Olympics pedestal to mark the official opening with the flame.

The event ended with a fireworks show and plenty more rounds of cheering.

“This really does get them all pumped up,” said Jacki Reynolds, Cambria County Special Olympics manager.

Bob Rager, one of three Cambria County skiers competing this year, said he’s looking forward to his 20th winter games.

His coach, Kristen Green, asked him how he feels when the torch lights and the games begin.

“I love it,” he said.

An estimated 350 athletes and 175 coaches are participating in the statewide competitions this year, which begin Monday and wrap up by Tuesday afternoon, when organizers hold closing ceremonies and hand out coveted medals.



### SPECIAL OLYMPICS

Mark Suman, a Westmoreland County athlete, lights the official torch of the 2015 Special Olympics Pennsylvania Winter Games. Opening ceremonies were held Sunday evening at Seven Springs Mountain Resort.

Gerard Hasson of Collegetown, Montgomery County, said he has more than 20 medals that he keeps hanging on a lamp in his bedroom.

He said he has been practicing weekly all winter to prepare for alpine skiing on Monday and Tuesday.

“It’s fun being in competition with different athletes,” he said. “It’s nice to get out in the winter, too.”

Through Tuesday, there will be alpine skiing, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing at Seven Springs and figure skating at the Cambria County War Memorial Arena. Speed skating also will be held at Planet Ice in Richland Township.

The opening ceremonies, held at the resort for the first time this year, inspire the athletes, Longtime coach Jim Hare said.

“It gets them excited to compete,” he said.

“They all look forward to seeing the torch lighting. It sets the tone for the competition.”

The Montgomery County coach has been involved in Special Olympics for 30 years.

“I probably get more from them than they get from me,” he said, between hugs and pats on the backs from athletes. “Seeing their growth and improvement in the sport – that’s very fulfilling.”

Kecia Bal is a reporter for The Tribune-Democrat. Follow her on Twitter at @KeciaBKay.