

Special Olympics Update for 2021

At this time last year and for many years before, we would be preparing to beg, cajole and even threaten some of you to give back, to step up, and to volunteer to ref some games for the athletes in Special Olympics. Along with the Dan Finn Classic and Coaches for Cancer, it is the main charitable organization that Board 33 supports every year. In a normal year, anywhere from 60 to 100 Board 33 members will come out to spread joy to these less fortunate athletes.

I say in a normal year. But this year and last are not normal years. You've all seen it in the delay and curtailment of high school, middle school, rec and travel team games. Leagues have cancelled games. Schools have eliminated sub-varsity sports. Several schools have cancelled their entire season. For games that will go on, fans will not be allowed in gyms.

Covid has hit basketball at every level and continues to do so. It ended the SONJ Spring Tournament prematurely last March, just like it did the high school and college seasons. And once again, it continues to impact Special Olympics.

Special Olympics of New Jersey held a number of Zoom meetings in the fall to determine the safest way to approach this situation and to offer options. I was invited to these meetings. The folks at SONJ are very cognizant of the many health risks the athletes and their parents experience, while recognizing the advantages of the camaraderie and interaction that sport provides. If you've ever been to any of our games, the first thing you may notice is the advanced age of many of the parents in the stands. SONJ was also concerned with just how many of the athletes would opt out on their own, fearing contact with and spread of the virus. Combined with restrictions on gym space and time placed on them by the schools that donate their facilities, it became obvious that a regular season was not tenable.

Therefore, there will be NO team sports, and hence no basketball, for this season, spring of 2021. They are encouraging teams and coaches to still meet with their athletes one on one to continue skills development and physical training but with severe restrictions aimed at protecting both the coaches and the players. There was some discussion of a small, outdoor basketball season for later in the year but nothing has been finalized in that regard. If it comes to fruition, I'll let the Board know the details ASAP.

On the bright side, the Special Olympics USA Games are still scheduled for the summer of 2022 in Orlando. These games include all the sports offered by Special Olympics and teams from around the country will be coming to compete. New Jersey is still making plans to send a contingent. The last USA Games were held in Seattle 2018 while we hosted the games here in New Jersey in 2014. If you are interested in volunteering in any capacity for this quadrennial event, the portal is now open. Several of our members have applied to referee the basketball

side but they need help in many areas. If you are interested, please go to www.specialolympicsflorida.org.