



Local News

Games offer challenge, camaraderie

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DREW ANGERER | photo@mdn.net Kelsie Kellen, 14, of Fredericksburg, Virginia, listens as Para-Olympian Scot Severn gives her instructions on how to correctly grip the javelin during the Paralympic Academy on Thursday afternoon at Saginaw Valley State University. Kellen has Spina bifida and has been in a wheelchair for four years. She competes regularly in track and field events across the country and is an internationally ranked wheelchair sprinter. Specializing in field event, Severn competed in the Beijing Para-Olympics this year and was giving clinics and one-on-one instruction to athletes on Thursday. Competition at the Thunder in the Valley Games for athletes with disabilities begins Friday and runs through Sunday at the university.

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Athletes are gathering from around the country to compete this weekend during the Thunder in the Valley Games at Saginaw Valley State University.

The games are organized for athletes with disabilities, with competitions in track and field, air rifle, archery, swimming, power lifting and handcycling.

For Derick Byrd, a 14-year-old from Lewisburg, Ohio, it's his first competition. Byrd received a prosthetic leg last year after having a leg amputation following an illness.

On Thursday he tried a variety of activities, including archery and sprinting. He also participated in a discus clinic taught by Jill Kennedy, who made it to the finals for discus and shotput in the Beijing 2008 Paralympic Games.

"It's pretty cool how you can take people with disabilities and put them in the same sports," Byrd said.

He hasn't let the change in his life set him back.

"You've just got to get used to the fact that it's not coming back, and get used to (the prosthetic leg)," he said.

Kennedy said the clinics offer a chance to offer training and tips to the children and adults who need to learn proper techniques.

"It's so much easier when you can get a lot of coaching," she said.

Dennis Oehler, a resident of Chesapeake, Va., set records as a sprinter and has taught techniques to thousands of runners. When he ran, the prosthetics were still designed for walking, but now specifically designed running legs have been developed with advanced technology. He watched Byrd learning how to throw a discus on the sunny afternoon Thursday.

"This is a great event for this area and the state," he said of the games, which allow children and adults to compete in a sanctioned event and get instruction.

"He's got the potential to be a para-Olympian a little later down the road," Oehler said after watching Byrd.

The events serve as a qualifier for higher levels of competition.

The games are organized by Saginaw-based Michigan Sports Unlimited. The group's board president, Scott Baranek, said they hope to draw 70 to 80 competitors during the weekends' events.

"Not only do we do it for the athletic events, but it's also to raise awareness," he said.

The regional event is available for local athletes and draws up-and-comers, like swimmer and sprinter Kelsie Kellen, a 14-year-old from Fredericksburg, Va.

She's already made it to national competitions and plans to travel overseas next year to compete. For her, there's another side of the competitions she enjoys — getting to make friends.

"At regional events it's a lot of the same people," she said. "At nationals, it's everybody. That's a lot of fun."

Events begin today and last through Sunday. For a schedule, visit

www.thunderinthevalleygames.com

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