

Special Olympics 40th Anniversary Event June 2025

The summer of 2025 represented a monumental milestone for disability sport on the Isle of Man. It saw us celebrate 40 years of the Special Olympics and our athletes competing on the world stage as an independent nation. Four decades of sport. 40 years of a volunteer and athlete led charity which has enhanced and changed the life of hundreds (if not thousands) of people with disabilities, their families, coaches and volunteers.

It has offered the chance to travel the world; to develop and maintain friendships from destinations we may have never come into contact with. It has provided us with an insight into different ways of



living, of cultures, of being, and provided us a vessel on which we have sailed to a land whereby the social model of disability is not just a utopian ideal or outlook, but a proven reality. We have seen athletes, whom throughout their life have had countless limitations and restrictions placed upon what they may be able to achieve, shattering the metaphorical glass ceiling time and time again, and achieve things that the average neurotypical person could not even dream of.

Much is often made of our Islands sporting prowess. Of our ability to flex our sporting muscle against the world's best. Of the achievements of the likes of Cav, Kennaugh and Joughin (to name but a few). They are rightly celebrated and immortalised on the Isle of Man through raceways, gold telephone boxes and spaces in the NSC's hall of fame. However, and I may be (slightly) biased here, but the achievements of the Islands Special Olympic community match these achievements at the very least. The number of athletes who have come home with medals (of all colours) and achieved personal bests really are too numerous to mention. But they

include notable athletes such as Lawrence Dyer (14 World Gold Medals), Nicola Wooldridge (7 World Gold Medals) and Duncan Watterson (4 world gold medals) Just three examples of individuals who have, against all odds trained, competed and represented the Isle of Man and won medals and surpassed expectations- time and time again.

From Missouri to Shanghai, to Dublin, Seoul, Abu Dhabi and Berlin. Our athletes have done it all. Travelled to each and every corner of the globe on an almost annual basis, competing in the sports that they love, with their friends, achieving personal bests, Island records and medals along the way.

We could focus on this for another 100 pages. Few things would please me more than to create our very own hall of fame. Perhaps we will. In fact, we definitely will. However, this is a task for another day.

And that is because the 40th Anniversary event in June, much like Special Olympics as a whole, was so much more than those huge, unbelievable and monumental moments in time. We came together to celebrate the other 50 weeks of every year. We marked the efforts and contributions of each athlete, family member, coach, volunteer and supporter that makes the charity what it is. Because whilst world-wide travel is fantastic. And while winning gold matters deeply to each and every person who wins one. It is not everything. In fact, it barely scratches the surface in explaining what we are about, or what has been achieved in the last 40 years.

Having been involved in the Special Olympics for just five of our 40 year history, I am admittedly just an amateur historian. However, the impact and change that can be made through sport has been plain to see since my first moment coaching the football team. It was evident within weeks, that Special Olympics was more than "just" sport. It was about family. About community. About belonging. The athletes and families are connected through a mutual bond and understanding. Their journeys have been similar (whilst never the same), they have all shared similar worries, fears and knock backs, but together, they have found a sense of togetherness, fun, laughter and achievement.

In June, we all came together at Marown sports field for an event that captured the very essence of Special Olympics IOM. Countless hours of preparation, endless ideas, a slightly comedic, chaotic last-minute scramble to get everything together and finally a day to lift the spirits of everyone in attendance in typical Manx sunshine.

The day oozed community spirit. From the gazebo company providing us what appeared to be the world's biggest tent at cost price, to the caterers feeding us all more than even the most enthusiastic diners



could manage, to the attendance of local singing and dance groups, MHK's, commissioners, the lieutenant governor, coaches, families, friends and volunteers. We welcomed past athletes, donning medals they won around the world decades ago, family members of athletes lost in years gone by, coaches who reminisced about their time with the charity and our current batch of enthusiastic, dedicated, committed and wonderful athletes. They are all a credit to the Isle of Man and to our charity as a whole.

There was a beautiful moment halfway through the day where we paid homage to and gave thanks to two athletes that really have "seen it all". Lawrence Dyer and Julie Hinstridge have been part of Special Olympics since its inception 40 years ago. Their contribution to the charity, to its cause and to their fellow athletes has been seismic. The blood, sweat and tears they have put in to raise the profile of disability sport was celebrated on the day. To raise money for the charity, train, compete, travel and more recently support and guide younger and up and coming athletes is a testament to their character and the stoicism they have displayed each and every week throughout the last 40 years. Both were presented with life

time achievement awards, and there was barely a dry eye on Marown sports field.

Our athletics coaches (Tony, Conner and Jules) organised a selection of races for the day which were a roaring success and competed in with the same vigour, determination and spirit as you'd expect in a world final. There was the sight of Barry (our swimming coach) locked in the stocks as athletes threw water sponges at him, a chill out zone offering a perfect place to get away and relax for those who found the day overstimulating, and even an area for the cyclists to get in those much-needed miles whilst not leaving the event!

So much effort went in across the board to making the day a success. And that very much captures the last 40 years. Not one person is paid a single penny in the running of Special Olympics Isle of Man. It is an entirely voluntary organisation. It is reliant on the good will and time of volunteers, athletes, coaches, families and the community in order to function. I struggle to even imagine the amount of hours given over the course of 40 years to both fundraise and ensure the charity can function. The athletes have taken part in so many bucket collections at Tesco they could well be invited to the staff Christmas party!

It is this good will, over such a long period of time, which has provided an outlet for people with disabilities to meet, compete and be their personal best. It has offered a safeguard against poor physical health. It has nurtured, cared for and most importantly celebrated one of ~~(if not the)~~ most beautiful, vibrant and resilient communities on our Island. It is something which I am continuously and overwhelmingly proud to be a part of. And I'm not sure I've felt so as much as I did at Marown.

I hope the team (and each and every person reading this) saw the day at Marown like I did. As a visual representation and celebration. As a thank you. We want to thank all of you who are involved in the Isle of Man Special Olympics movement. To the athletes who give their all. The coaches and volunteers who enable them to do so. The sponsors, donators and organisations who ensure it can happen. And particularly to the families who support their loved ones. Because we would not be where we are without you.

As a charity and a committee, we are well aware that we don't get everything right. To do so would be impossible. However, looking at the faces of the athletes at each training session, social event and meeting, reminds me that we must be doing something right.

We are constantly looking for new coaches, volunteers and contributors. If you are reading this and considering getting involved, get in touch. Because it's people like you that can ensure we will be celebrating our 80th anniversary in no time at all.

And finally, to the athletes I say this. As coaches and as a committee, we are but custodians of your charity. Because the charity is yours. It always will be. Thank you for taking us along for the ride.

Pete Corkhill,
Sporting Director
Special Olympics Isle of Man



(special thanks as always to Dave from DK Photography!)