



6 March 2017

For immediate release

## **Media release: Special Olympics athletes depart for World Winter Games**

Thirteen athletes with intellectual disabilities from around the country are preparing to take on the world's best as they depart for the 2017 Special Olympics World Winter Games in Graz, Austria, this week.

The group of athletes with intellectual disabilities is the largest ever New Zealand delegation to take part in a World Winter Games. They will compete alongside 3,000 athletes from 110 nations at the Games in Graz, Austria from 14-25 March 2017.

The New Zealand athletes are supported by a team of seven volunteer management and coaching staff, and will take part in both Alpine skiing and snowboarding.

The New Zealand delegation will depart from Auckland on Wednesday 8 March. Former Special Olympics athlete Robert Martin, who recently became the first person with a learning disability elected to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, will travel to Auckland to give a motivational address to the athletes before they depart.

Special Olympics New Zealand Chief Executive Kathy Gibson, said that for many of the competing athletes, the chance to travel and take part in an international event is a once in a lifetime opportunity.

"It's a fantastic opportunity for our athletes, and an experience that they won't forget," Kathy said.

"Not only will they get to take part in an international sporting event, but they will also meet and make friends with fellow athletes from all over the world. This camaraderie and friendship is what many of our athletes enjoy most about Special Olympics."

Media are invited to attend Robert Martin's address and to capture the team's departure.

**DATE:** Wednesday 8 March

**TIME:** 2.30pm – 5pm. Robert Martin will address the athletes at 2.45pm

**VENUE:** Novotel Auckland International Airport, Ray Emery Drive, Auckland Airport

ENDS

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*Created by the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation. Authorised and accredited by Special Olympics, Inc for the benefit of persons with intellectual disabilities.*

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**Editor's notes:**

**The New Zealand delegation**

Alpine skiing

- Ella Sharples Special Olympics Auckland
- Rachel Oemcke Special Olympics Manawatu
- Rebecca Heath Special Olympics Hutt Valley
- Michael Holdsworth Special Olympics Wellington
- Ben Blanche Special Olympics Central Otago
- Nathan Symister Special Olympics Otago
- Thomas Loftus Special Olympics Hutt Valley
- Chris Westcott Special Olympics North Harbour
- Cameron Jarvis Special Olympics Horowhenua
- Jason Donovan Special Olympics Kapiti

Snowboarding

- Kaa Dekker Special Olympics Auckland
- Marty Joyce Special Olympics Auckland
- Jarrod Gilbert Special Olympics Te Awamutu

Management/Coaching Team

- Head of Delegation: Brian Benn Special Olympics Otago
- Assistant Head of Delegation: Karen Erenstrom Special Olympics Hutt Valley
- Additional Staff Coach: Jane Haskell Special Olympics North Harbour
- Head Coach – Alpine Skiing: Joanna Donovan Special Olympics Kapiti
- Coach – Alpine Skiing: Grant Haskell Special Olympics North Harbour
- Coach – Alpine Skiing: Dave Cowie Special Olympics Southland
- Coach – Snowboarding: Johnny Gilbert Special Olympics Otago

Special Olympics World Winter Games: [www.austria2017.org](http://www.austria2017.org)

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