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For immediate release

Media release: Special Olympics New Zealand announces World Winter Games contenders

Special Olympics New Zealand has announced its delegation of athletes with intellectual disabilities that will represent New Zealand at the Special Olympics World Winter Games in Graz, Austria next year.

The group of 13 athletes 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 from 14-25 March 2017, and will be supported by a team of seven volunteer management and coaching staff. The New Zealand athletes will take part in both alpine skiing and snowboarding.

Head of Delegation Brian Benn said to qualify for selection the athletes had to have taken part in a local and regional Special Olympics event, have won a medal at the the National Games last year, and been nominated for selection by their local Club.

"The number and quality of athletes who worked hard to be selected for the Games was so great, that we applied to Special Olympics International to have our team quota increased," Brian said. "Thankfully we were successful and were able to increase our team from the 10 we sent to the previous World Winter Games in at the previous Winter Games in 2013."

Brian said the selection panel had an equally difficult task in selecting the coaching and management team for the Games.

"We also had a very experienced and capable group of coaches apply for selection. There were some difficult choices to be made amongst both athletes and coaches, but the end result is a strong team that I will be proud to lead," he said.

Chief Executive for Special Olympics New Zealand Kathy Gibson said being selected to represent New Zealand is a both great honour and a real opportunity for Special Olympics athletes.

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

Special Olympics New Zealand

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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.

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
- Luke Pindur (Reserve) Special Olympics Auckland

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

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About Special Olympics New Zealand

Special Olympics New Zealand is a year-round programme of sports training and competition for children and adults with intellectual disabilities. More than 7000 athletes throughout the country train and compete in 13 different Olympic-type summer and winter sports.

Special Olympics New Zealand also offers athletes leadership development through its Athlete Leadership Programme, health screening via Healthy Athletes[®], and encourages social inclusion through Unified Sports[®], where intellectually disabled athletes are combined in teams with unified partners (without intellectual disabilities).

Founded in 1968 by Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Special Olympics provides athletes continuing opportunities to develop fitness, demonstrate courage and experience joy as they participate in the sharing of gifts and friendship with other athletes, their families and the community.

Special Olympics World Winter Games: www.austria2017.org

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