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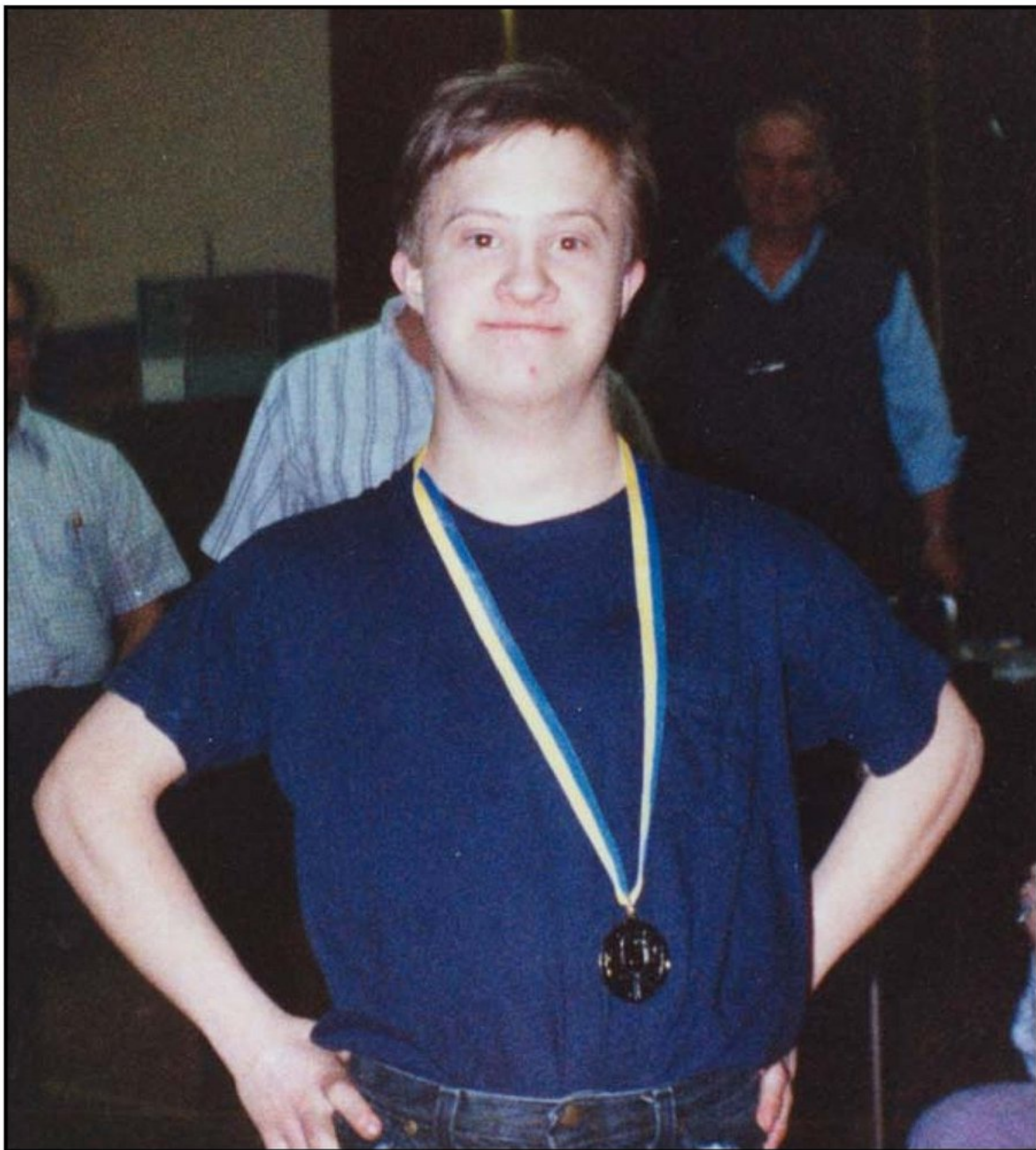
Mike Van Zee, Special Olympian



Written by Marilyn Gould

www.readinga-z.com

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Mike Van Zee, age 9, at a track meet for Special Olympics

Humble Beginnings

No one likes being bullied, and Mike Van Zee was no different from anyone else. He didn't like being teased. He didn't like being laughed at. He didn't like it when kids tried to egg him into a fight. He knew he was small for his age. He also knew he wasn't as smart as some kids. He didn't think he was strong enough to stick up for himself or stand up for his rights.

That was before Mike entered the Special Olympics program. Special Olympics is a worldwide organization founded by Eunice Kennedy Shriver. Mrs. Shriver became a champion of children and adults who had difficulty learning and who were slow in developing. She saw that they were often in special schools or no school at all. That meant they often had no way to become active in sports or school athletics.

Many people thought that people with learning challenges would not feel the personal rewards of **competition**.

Mike at his high school graduation with his niece, Ashley





Eunice Shriver marches behind athletes in the Opening Ceremonies for the 1970 International Special Olympics.

Camp Shriver

Eunice Shriver didn't agree. She believed that everyone should be given the **opportunity** to **excel**. In June 1962, she invited 35 girls and boys with intellectual disabilities to her home in Maryland. She offered them the opportunity to try out a variety of physical activities. She called the event Camp Shriver. It was so successful that it became an **annual** event. Each year, it became more and more popular. By 1968 there were more than 300 camps just like Camp Shriver where kids participated in different sports.

That year, Mrs. Shriver worked with others to organize the first official Special Olympics. The event took place in Chicago, Illinois. Participants came from 26 U.S. states and from Canada. They competed in floor hockey, **aquatics**, and athletics. Mrs. Shriver proudly announced that the Special Olympics would be a regular event. Its purpose was to give people with intellectual disabilities “the chance to play, the chance to compete, and the chance to grow.”



An athlete from Italy competes in the Special Olympics European Youth Games in 2006.



Arnold Schwarzenegger, son-in-law to Eunice Shriver, shows his support for Special Olympics by being part of the torch lighting on the Great Wall of China.

Special Olympics Games

Now, more than 2 million children and adults compete in the Special Olympics Games. Special Olympics has both summer and winter games just like the Olympic Games it was named after—all free of charge. Athletes from around the world come together for these events. The 2003 Special Olympics World Summer Games, held in Ireland, drew more than 6,500 athletes from 150 countries.

By the Numbers

Over 2 million athletes with intellectual disabilities compete in Special Olympics.

There are more than 200 Special Olympics programs in more than 160 countries.

Special Olympics consists of 32 Olympic-type individual and team sports.

Athletes must be at least 8 years old to compete in Special Olympics.

Most Popular Special Olympics Sports

Number of participants*	Sport
889,538	athletics
282,498	football (soccer)
239,782	basketball
200,572	bowling
159,100	aquatics
131,163	table tennis
90,884	bocce
71,982	volleyball
48,371	cycling
47,056	floor hockey

* Determined by number of participants in each sport as stated in the 2005 Special Olympics Athlete Participation Report.

Source: www.specialolympics.org

Special Olympics Events

Alpine Skiing	Handball
Aquatics	Judo
Athletics	Kayaking
Badminton	Netball
Basketball	Open Water Swimming
Bocce	Powerlifting
Bowling	Roller Skating
Cricket	Sailing
Cross Country Skiing	Snowboarding
Cycling	Snowshoeing
Equestrian	Softball
Figure Skating	Speed Skating
Floor Hockey	Table Tennis
Floorball	Team Handball
Football (Soccer)	Tennis
Golf	Volleyball
Gymnastics	

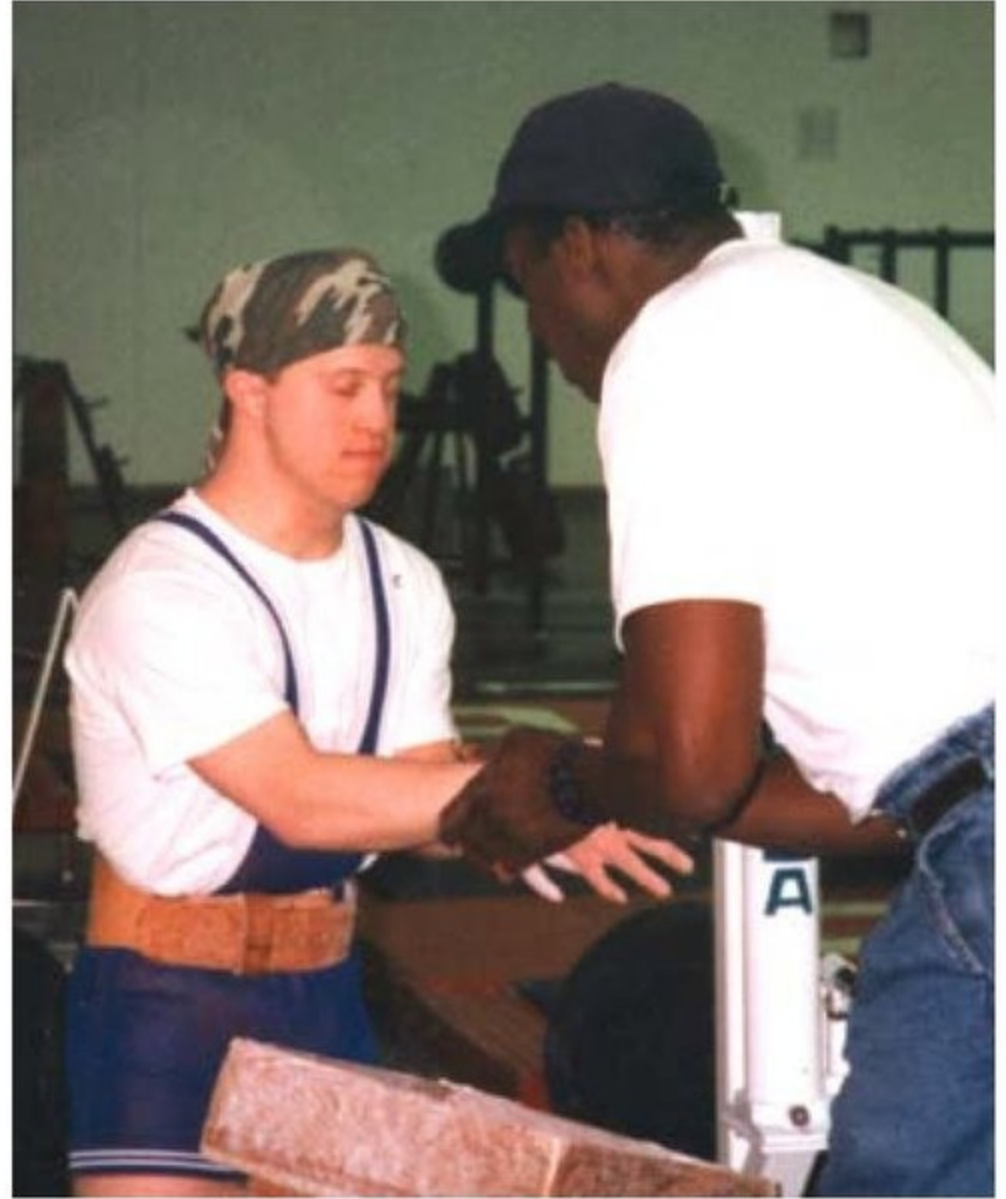


An athlete competes on the rings as part of the gymnastics competition in Rome, Italy.

Coach Pat

When Mike Van Zee entered the Special Olympics program in 1983, he met Coach Pat Gray. Coach Pat liked Mike right away. He liked his smile, his enthusiasm, and his spirit.

Coach Pat heard that Mike was having problems with kids teasing him at school because he was small, slow, and not very strong. “I think I can help,” Coach Pat said. He asked Mike and his parents, “What do you think about Mike learning how to lift



Mike and Coach Pat in the gym.

weights? I can teach him if he’s willing to take the time and work very hard.”

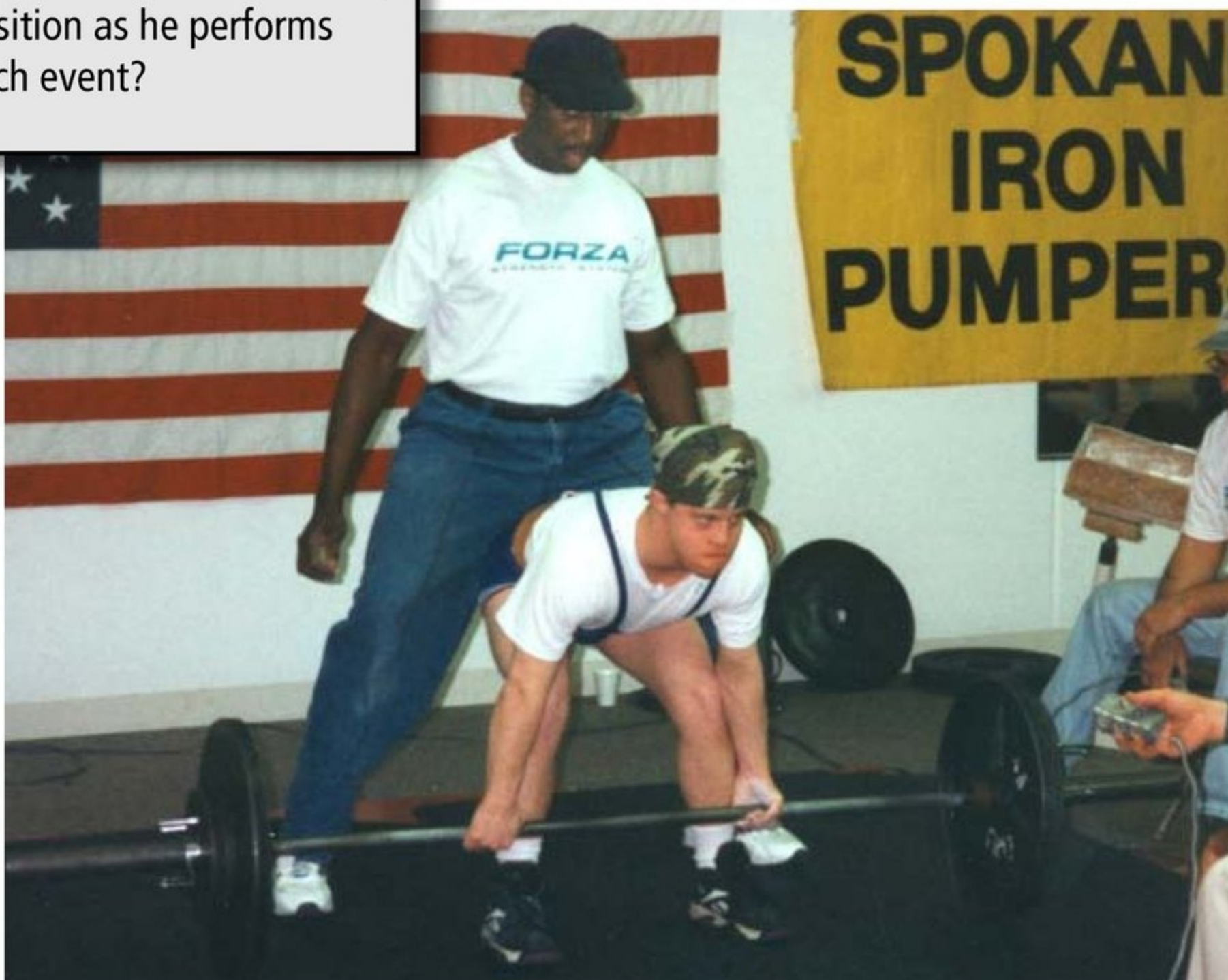
Mike liked the idea, and so did his parents. They knew he wouldn’t be teased if he became strong by lifting weights. Mike was excited about working out with Coach Pat. He could hardly wait to begin.

Learning to “pump iron,” or powerlift, is not easy. It takes time, **determination**, and skill. Proper body position is important to avoid injury. Mike was very **industrious** and worked hard every day to do his best. His **perseverance** paid off. At the end of eight years of hard work, to his surprise, Coach Pat told him he was ready to compete. Mike was one of the members of the Washington team chosen to compete in the 1999 Summer Games in North Carolina. He finished in the middle of his heat, and everyone was pleased with his performance.



Mike (left) with powerlifting teammate Karie Luce (far right) and Coach Pat during the 1999 Special Olympics.

Powerlifting consists of three events: squat, deadlift, and bench press, or a combination of two or three of those events. In the top photograph, Mike is performing the squat; in the bottom photograph, the deadlift. What is different about Mike's body position as he performs each event?





Runners line up to start a race during the Special Olympics in Los Angeles, California.

The Oath

In 1968, before the Special Olympics Summer Games, Eunice Shriver gave a speech and said, “In ancient Rome, the **gladiators** went into the arena with these words on their lips: ‘Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt.’ Today, all of you athletes are in the arena. Many of you will win, but even more important, I know you will be brave and bring credit to your parents and to your country. Let us begin the Olympics. Thank you.”

That speech has been made an **oath** and has been repeated at every meeting of the Special Olympics World Games.

Community Champion

And what happened to Mike? Besides power lifting, he speed skates and swims to keep fit. He is a member of Iron Pumpers and Spokane Blades, and he holds two part-time jobs—one at a taco restaurant and one at Gonzaga University. He takes part in a community musical every year. He also enjoys skiing, bicycling, track, bowling, rock climbing, playing Nintendo, and hanging out with his friends.

Mike's **self-confidence** and **involvement** with his community make him a pleasure to be around. His days of being bullied and teased have been left in the past, thanks to the self-confidence he gained through participation in the Special Olympics. He now knows he can do anything he sets his mind to do.

Mike wears a medal he won in powerlifting while coached by Pat Gray.



Glossary

annual (<i>adj.</i>)	yearly (p. 6)
aquatics (<i>n.</i>)	water sports (p. 7)
competition (<i>n.</i>)	a rivalry for something that is desired (p. 5)
determination (<i>n.</i>)	an attitude of being willing to work hard to reach a goal (p. 12)
excel (<i>v.</i>)	to do well (p. 6)
gladiators (<i>n.</i>)	fighters in ancient Rome who fought in public to entertain other people (p. 14)
industrious (<i>adj.</i>)	hard-working (p. 12)
involvement (<i>n.</i>)	participation (p. 15)
oath (<i>n.</i>)	a promise (p. 14)
opportunity (<i>n.</i>)	a chance to do something (p. 6)
perseverance (<i>n.</i>)	steady work to reach a goal (p. 12)
self-confidence (<i>n.</i>)	belief in yourself and your abilities (p. 15)

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