First-ever Special Olympics USA National Games Announces Torch Run Final Leg

Runners representing 48 states will travel through 81 Iowa communities

Ames, Iowa — Organizers of the 2006 Special Olympics USA National Games announced today the first-ever United States Law Enforcement Torch Run® (LETR) Final Leg team. Law enforcement officers and Special Olympics athletes from around the country will partner during this event to carry the “Flame of Hope” from Soldier Field in Chicago and will make stops all over Iowa before ending at the Iowa State University campus in Ames, home of the inaugural Special Olympics USA National Games, July 2 – 7, 2006. The “Flame of Hope” symbolizes the courage, hope and determination represented by Special Olympics athletes.

John Focht of the Council Bluffs Police Department will represent Iowa as a law enforcement runner. Focht has been involved in Special Olympics for close to 12 years and has participated in statewide torch runs before, but never for an event as large as the National Games.

“Special Olympics is such a cool program,” Focht said. “It’s really an honor to be chosen to participate in the Torch Run.” Focht began volunteering with Special Olympics as a coach for athletics (track and field) and softball in Ralston, Neb. He has been involved with Special Olympics Iowa for about seven years, and he has taken part in many local fundraisers for Special Olympics.

Iowa has one Special Olympics athlete participating as a runner in the event. Rolla Lucas is from Davenport and recently took part in a local Torch Run in the Quad Cities.

Once the Final Leg crosses the Mississippi River into Iowa, three routes will bring the runners through the state beginning Monday, June 26. Route one begins at the Mercy Medical Center in Clinton and spends the next few days traveling north to the Decorah area, west stopping by Council Bluffs, and then north to Arnolds Park. The tail end of route one brings the runners from the Carroll area to Jordan Creek Mall in West Des Moines.

Route two begins in Muscatine and spends the week traveling to areas including Ottumwa, Indianola, Sioux City, and Fort Dodge. Route three begins in Iowa City and travels to areas including Cedar Falls, Mason City, Shenandoah, Estherville, and Pella. The Torch Run ends in Ames as the Olympic cauldron is ignited at the
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Opening Ceremonies of the 2006 Special Olympics USA National Games. For a complete schedule and list of cities, see the accompanying document or contact Jennifer Oredson at jennifero@2rm.com or 515-557-2010.

The Final Leg event kicks off on Saturday, June 24, with a “Flame of Hope” Lighting Ceremony at Soldier Field in Chicago, home of the first international Special Olympics Games in 1968. The flame will travel through Illinois to the Mississippi River where, on the evening of June 25, the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter will transport the flame across the river to Davenport, Iowa.

"We are excited to begin our Final Leg journey at the birthplace of the Special Olympics movement, Soldier Field in Chicago," says Major Michael Teem, the Team Captain of the United States Law Enforcement Torch Run Final Leg Team. “This unified Final Leg event in support of the USA National Games will cover a lot of ground in Illinois and especially Iowa, and we are honored to heighten awareness of not only the Special Olympics National Games but also the abilities and drive of Special Olympics athletes. Having nine Special Olympics athletes on the team is great, and I know they will set the tone and lead us all the way to Ames.”

The Final Leg Team consists of more than 100 participants, including 60 law enforcement officer runners, nine Special Olympics athlete runners, and 40 support team members. Forty-eight states and the District of Columbia will be represented throughout the run by Torch Runners who have dedicated time and support for Special Olympics, thereby earning the chance to participate. Nearly 90 individual communities will welcome the Final Leg runners with community-wide celebrations as they make their way through Illinois and Iowa. Runners will carry a torch designed exclusively for the inaugural USA National Games.

The first Law Enforcement Torch Run® was initiated in 1981 by Wichita, Kan., Police Chief Richard LaMunyon. Identifying a need to raise money and awareness for Special Olympics, Officer LaMunyon created the Torch Run as a way for local law enforcement officials to support Special Olympics. Twenty-five years after its inception, the LETR is Special Olympics’ largest grass-roots fundraiser and public awareness vehicle, raising more than $21.5 million for Special Olympics programs in 2005 alone.

Sponsors for the 2006 National Games LETR Final Leg event include CARQUEST Auto Parts, the Premier International Partner of the LETR; Casey's General Stores; Winnebago Industries; the Fraternal Order of Police; Verizon; Thorlos; and Lake Chevrolet in Clear Lake, Iowa.

A complete list of Final Leg team members, including their home states, is available online at http://www.2006nationalgames.org/events/torchrunfinalleg.php.

Media interested in attending the 2006 Special Olympics USA National Games are required to register online to obtain credentials. Register at www.2006nationalgames.org. Media also can obtain more information about the Games on this site under the “News” section. Specific questions also can be addressed to Jennifer Oredson at jennifero@2rm.com or 515.557.2010.

About Special Olympics
Special Olympics is an international organization that changes lives by promoting understanding, acceptance, and inclusion between people with and without intellectual disabilities. Through year-round sports training, athletic competition, and other related programming for more than 2.25 million children and adults with intellectual disabilities in more than 150 countries, Special Olympics has created a model community that celebrates people’s diverse gifts. Founded in 1968 by Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Special Olympics provides people with intellectual disabilities continuing opportunities to realize their potential, develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, and experience joy and friendship. There is no cost to participate in Special Olympics. Visit Special Olympics at www.specialolympics.org.

About the 2006 Special Olympics USA National Games
The inaugural Special Olympics USA National Games will take place on the Iowa State University campus in Ames, Iowa, July 2 – 7, 2006. Sports competition for the 2006 Special Olympics USA National Games includes aquatics, athletics (track and field), basketball, gymnastics, powerlifting, bowling, tennis, golf, softball, bocce, soccer, and volleyball. In the spirit of Olympic-type sports, there will be spectacular Opening
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and Closing Ceremonies, a Special Olympics Festival, a National Youth Summit, and symposiums. In addition to more than 3,000 athletes representing all 50 states, 8,000 volunteers, 2,000 coaches and official delegates, and 12,000 family members and friends of athletes are expected to converge on the Iowa State University campus in Ames. For more information, please visit www.2006nationalgames.org.

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