

Everybody comes up a winner at Island Special Olympics

By STEVE CROSS

If you didn't know Betty Cash, chances are you would have met her yesterday by the time you left the Staten Island Special Olympics at the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook.

Silently exuding a sense of pride, Betty was reaching her hand to anyone within reaching distance, trying to get attention. Once she had it, she raised her other hand to her neck, where she proudly showed off a silver medal won in competition.

After hearing the expected congratulations, she gleefully moved on to the next person — familiar face or not — to show off what took her a year of training to win.

But Betty Cash was far from alone.

All 600 of the retarded participants in yesterday's annual Staten Island Special Olympics were winners.

Each received either a gold, silver or bronze medal in recognition of attendance at exercise and preparation classes at one of 12 centers in the borough that help motivate them for the Olympics and, even more importantly, give them something to look forward to every week.

Another participant, 17-year-old David Sullivan of Grymes Hill, needed little motivation — he was so eager that his first try at the broad jump left him almost flat on his stomach when he fell forward from the momentum of his jump.

A second try turned him into an instant gold medal winner, with a jump of six-and-a-half feet.

"I feel good. I did beautiful," said David, as he slipped a pair of jeans over his gym shorts. "It's like going to a river and jumping in."

Richard Salinardi, coordinator of the Staten Island Special Olympics,

pointed out that while the event itself takes only one day, work in the training clubs goes on all year.

"We like to get the kids in throughout the year and after school, doing programs the Board of Education doesn't do," explained Salinardi.

For the first time in the games, Salinardi said that competition for the profoundly retarded was included.

"We devised games for their skills," he said, including some utilizing eye movement, blowing up balloons and even wheelchair races.

Two other categories of competition included games for the ambulatory and those for the multiple handicapped.

"We can take every type of retarded person and devise games for them," he said, leaving no one out of the fun.

In some cases, the fun was stretched even further.

Visitors who stopped by the running competition couldn't help but notice a group clad in brown jogging jackets with white stripes, the team uniform for A Very Special Place in New Dorp, one of the year-round training centers.

"We're doing pretty good here," Sal Rizzo, the center's coach, said proudly as he clutched a team tally sheet. "We have a couple of first places, and took first, second and third in the 50-meter dash."

The center currently has 21 people enrolled in its training programs, which are offered twice a week.



Luis Speez, left, relaxes with volunteer Michelle D'Amato after competing in one of the Special Olympics events.



Other participants cheer as two competitors take off in a sprinting race in the Special Olympics held yesterday at the Staten Island Developmental Center in Willowbrook. S.I. Advance photos by Larry Lettera.

"They train in all the events," said Linda Abel, a recreation therapist who also sported the team colors.

"They've come such a long way," she continued. "In the beginning, some couldn't even run. Now, I get so excited to see their faces when they've won. But just to see them run is great, too."

Salinardi extended thanks to the many volunteers who showed up to help in the events, including some from Tottenville, New Dorp and Moore Catholic High Schools, the Knights of Columbus and the Blue Knights.

In addition, Burger King supplied food for the contestants, the American Legion Auxiliary some assistance and the Richmond County Drum and Pipe Corps a touch of music.

Even the Army got into the act, donating a tent structure that housed magicians and other surprises for contestants and visitors alike.

As Salinardi stood near the broad jump, he smiled and reflected on the games.

"It's the greatest feeling in the world seeing these kids participate and to be involved from the training right through the games," he said. "But it's also great to see volunteers getting the idea how thrilling it is to work with kids like this. It's all very positive."



Jeff Raines, left, receives his medal at the Special Olympics as David Robinson, right, waits to get his.