

# For these athletes, it's all about love

■ S.I. Special Olympics — and Olympians — prove that the real joy is in taking part

By TARA FREDRECK  
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

The pure love of sport is alive and well on Staten Island. While the media barrage would have you believe otherwise, there are still plenty of athletes who play for fun, not glory, well-served as it might be. More than 550 Staten Island athletes from 13 different clubs participated in the 21st Annual Staten Island Special Olympics Area Games yesterday at Tottenville High School, Huguenot.

The athletes took part in various track and field events and spent down time enjoying arts and crafts, dance performances by students of Miss Caroline's Dance Studio, Annadale, and a special visit from Baby Bop.

"It's a way to bring the whole community together," said area coordinator Richie Salinardi. The SISO Area Games were made possible with the generous support of close to 20 local companies and organizations and the help of numerous volunteers.

A little cooperation from Mother Nature didn't hurt either. The threat of rain gave way to a sunny, 80-degree day.

"The weather was beautiful," said Debbie Ellis, 36, of West Brighton. "It drizzled a little bit but SISO kept on."

Ellis, who enjoys swimming, won first-place medals in the 1-mile run and softball throw and was also part of the third-place relay team.

"I thought it (the weather) would be bad," said Christian Russo, a 26-year old athlete from Arrochar. "But I have to thank God because He's the one who made it happen."

Russo, who has been participating in SISO since he was 8, completed the 1-mile run in 9 minutes, 35 seconds, earned a gold medal in the softball throw and a silver for his participation in the relay. He

is employed full-time as an elevator operator at Staten Island Tech but still finds time for training in swimming, floor hockey, volleyball, bowling and rollerblading.

"The whole thing is about the experience," said Beth Fromkin, a SISO administrative staffer from Eltingville. "They have a great time."

Mary Pannese, 31, of South Beach, took home medals in the 100-meter walk, softball throw and 100M relay, and also made a banner to give to her mother for Mother's Day. She has been participating in SISO since 1972.

"It keeps me going," Pannese said. "I made a lot of friends."

Most of the athletes train and participate in various events six days a week in addition to working and going to school.

Coletta Bailey, a 25-year-old West Brighton resident, has been playing softball for three years. She is employed at Shop Rite, goes to school at College of Staten Island and now would like to add swimming to her already busy schedule.

Some of the athletes give back even more.

Luis Lopez, 30, has participated as an athlete in the games since age 8 and he now also volunteers his time as a coach.

George Bowden found out it's never too late to get involved. The retired West Brighton resident won medals yesterday in the softball throw, 100M walk and frisbee toss and this is only his first year of participation.

"I swim, too," Bowden said. The dedication of these athletes has not gone unnoticed by Islanders.

"We're really fortunate on Staten Island," said Salinardi. "The Island) has really adopted SISO; it's evident in the amount of community relationships with various groups, parents and private citizens. It's a very inclusive type of operation, it's all volunteer and that's what makes it so effective."

"I just wish we had more people involved," said Fromkin. "Some of the people here today, it's their first time. I think we've got them hooked."

Steven Shiel, a sixth-grader at Prall Intermediate School, West Brighton, was one of those first-timers.

"It was fun, even though it was my first time," Shiel said.

"You get addicted to it," said Mario Papa, a nine-year volunteer with SISO and yesterday's Baby Bop. "Just the smiles on their faces makes it all worth it."

The New York Special Olympics Metro Games will take place on June 1 in upper Manhattan with the State Games following June 13-16 in Albany.