

By **URSULA REEL**
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The Staten Island Special Olympics and On Your Mark organizations are not day cares for those with mental retardation. They are training programs for serious athletes — athletes who win medals and ribbons for exceptional endeavors amid stiff competition.

"We aren't here to babysit," says Pete Sanzio, 26, a trainer for On Your Mark. "The athletes train full-time, have personal bests and work to better them in competition. They know when they are being challenged and they appreciate their rewards more when they have to step up

to the occasion.

"They don't get medals just for showing up," Sanzio states.

But every Staten Island athlete who showed up at the New York State Summer Special Olympics Games in Albany in mid-June came back with hardware.

Rich Salinardi, the area coordinator for Special Olympics, says Staten Island

has produced athletes who dominate state, national and international competitions for nearly 22 years — since the program's inception here.

And one of the reasons for that, in Salinardi's opinion, is that the Island is so ripe with volunteers — nearly 600 — so athletes are afforded advanced training and sport diversity.

"One of the more difficult things to teach is

team sports," Salinardi explains. "It is one thing to teach a particular skill, such as throwing or running, but it takes true dedication and a tremendous amount of time to get the athletes to work as one unit."

The dedication has been rewarded with success. The Island's women's softball team took second in the World Games last year, and the boys' softball team has a string of first-place titles in the NYS Fall games.

According to Salinardi, S.I. athletes currently have their choice of any sport that is in the 1996 Olympic Games, and the range of teams from the Island allows them to dominate medal counts.

"The other teams from the state are afraid

of us when we show up," Sanzio said. "They know we are always tough in every event."

Hence, the training sessions aren't play time. At a recent weightlifting session, Sanzio, John Buttermark, Joe Loglisci and Chico Reyes monitored approximately 15 athletes, all of whom had competed at the NYS Summer games. Buttermark and Reyes are parents of athletes, while Loglisci is a volunteer.

The athletes are expected to attend regular practice sessions in order to retain their spot on the competitive team. They come to learn, but they also clearly have fun at these training sessions.

Visitors are treated to rousing and cheerful hellos and handshakes. The athletes introduce themselves and make small talk and jokes. Then they get down to business.

"Russo, you're up," says Loglisci.

Ronnie Russo approaches the barbell for a deadlift. He puts on his weightlifting belt, plants his feet and adjusts his hands on the bar. While a moment ago, Ronnie was laughing with coach Sanzio, he now wears a face of serious concentration. Reyes calls for a few adjustments, Ronnie makes them, then hauls the weight up with minimal strain. His teammates applaud.

Up steps Maria Maisonet, who, like Ronnie, achieved a personal best in the recent Summer Games powerlifting competition. Maria, 28, holds the NYS record in the 132-pound division with a dead lift of 270 pounds. Maisonet makes her lift easily as well.

Parents stand by proudly and watch their children achieve. They openly discuss their happiness as guardians for the athletes.

"My son is the highlight of my life," says Buttermark of John Jr., a triple gold-medal winner in the Summer Games' powerlifting competition with a 225-pound bench press and a 365-pound deadlift.

"I take him everywhere I go — to Aruba, to Florida, wherever,"