

# Excellence is Disarming

It's a revelation for some, but Special Olympics athletes are good at sports

by Annemarie van Wieringen

It was Oprah Winfrey who said that “Excellence is the best deterrent to racism or sexism”; but it was Special Olympics athletes who showed that excellence is the best deterrent to pity and discrimination.

When Rasejakate Pesa took up his position at the starting line of the annual Mayor’s Race (half marathon), few may have noticed his disability. And those who did would surely have wondered if he shouldn’t have entered the “fun run” instead.

But by the time this Special Olympics athlete from a rural village in South Africa’s Limpopo province had finished the race, his competitors were certainly *wishing* he’d entered the fun run. Rasejakate accepted his gold medal and winner’s check from the town’s mayor with humility and pride, before heading back home to show his mother.

“There are some things that I cannot do, but there are many things that I can. I can run. I can run fast and I can win.”

Every year the coastal town of Knysna in South Africa hosts a full and half marathon, starting in the thick indigenous forests and ending at the lagoon’s edge. This race is one of the most popular events on the road-running calendar and entries are booked well before the closing date.

Cape Town athlete Nelson Bass trains with the University of Cape Town’s athletic club because they train

hard. “When we’re running, it’s just about running. It doesn’t matter about what work you do or how well you can read, it only matters how fast you can get to the finish line.”

Nelson finished 7th overall in a field of over 4,000 at the 2006 Knysna half Marathon in a time of 1:14.09.

When Mike Lugg took the decision to take his son out of a special education school so that he could play golf full time, it was because Tom’s ability on the golf course far outweighed his disability in the classroom.

Two years of intensive training have led this 17-year-old Special Olympics South Africa athlete to a point where he plays off a consistent 5 handicap, is a regular player at mainstream tournaments and recently joined the Golf School of Excellence—a breeding ground for future champions. These alone are remarkable achievements, matched only “by the way sport and his participation in Special Olympics have taught him life skills and changed him from an introvert, into a confident young man,” said his proud father.

For decades, Special Olympics has changed countless attitudes through the conspicuous courage and determination and joy our athletes project. The 2007 Special Olympics World Summer Games will be no different, they’ll just silence the remaining critics with their sheer speed and ability and blinding excellence.



Special Olympics South Africa athlete Tom Lugg (left) will compete in golf at the 2007 Special Olympics World Summer Games in China. Shown here with his father, Mike Lugg.



Tom Lugg has joined the Golf School of Excellence in South Africa. He has a consistent 5 handicap.



Special Olympics South Africa athlete Rasejakate Pesa (right) will compete in athletics at the 2007 Special Olympics World Games. Pesa has run in mainstream races and won.