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On the Road to the World Games

The rules of the basketball practice competition are straightforward: Two teams of approximately 10 players form a circle at each basket on the main court in UC Santa Barbara's Robertson Gymnasium. The first team to score 10 baskets from their free throw line wins. Instructions received, team members and their trainers immediately begin lobbing balls at the hoop, each group pushing to be the first to make all 10 baskets.

In another area of the gym other teammates execute partner mirror drills to improve lateral coordination. At the far end, dancers rehearse their moves with golden balls and hoops.

The purpose for all the hard work? It's the last few training days before Special Olympics Team Panama heads down to Los Angeles for the 2015 World Games. The Panamanian team, joined by delegations from Qatar and Bhutan, set up camp in UCSB's undergraduate Manzanita Village residence halls for a few days of training and relaxation before the big event. Roughly 100 Special Olympians, along with coaches, trainers and other volunteers, made themselves at home in their temporary seaside digs.

For the past eight months, volunteers have been preparing for this visit.

"You have to think on a big scale about having people from three different countries here and making sure that they feel welcomed, they're safe and they're having fun," said Megan Wingo, chair of Goleta Host Town, the locally based arm of the Special

Olympics responsible for hosting delegates. The City of Goleta was chosen by the Special Olympics organization last March as one of its newest host towns. As such, it is responsible for providing access to practice facilities as well as to entertainment and recreation during the athletes' stay.

The community pitched in: UCSB provided campus accommodations and meals at a "net cost" for the program, and local businesses from the Four Seasons Biltmore to Lane Farms donated goods and services.

The City of Santa Barbara also hosted Special Olympics athletes this year.

After their arrival on Tuesday, July 21, the teams set to training in Rob Gym in the mornings, leaving the rest of the day free for activities such as yoga, arts and crafts, lawn games, visits to the campus's marine touch tank and to the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History and dinners and evening entertainment.

"I liked everything," Panamanian athlete Carlos Loo Wong said of the program of events and activities offered during his stay. A veteran of the World Games, Loo, 31, is in his second quest to be the best in the sport of bowling. "It feels great to be here, especially with the fact that I can represent my country," he said through a translator.

"I'm a little nervous," said teammate Lisbeth Rivera, 15, who is making her first appearance at the World Games. She has been training for 10 years as a rhythmic gymnast, competing in major regional competitions but this would be her first world event. She does, however, look forward to the new experience, she added.

With the goals of better inclusion and acceptance of people with intellectual disabilities, the Special Olympics World Games is the world's largest sports and humanitarian event. This year over 6,500 athletes from 165 countries are participating in 25 different sports at various venues in Los Angeles.

Even before reaching the event, the participants have inspired people along the way.

"It has been a unique experience and an honor to be able to contribute in even a small way to such an amazing event," said Angelica Diaz of UCSB's conferences and event services. She attributes the success of the pre-World Games hosting program on campus to hard work from her Housing & Residential Life colleagues in

housekeeping and dining services as well as students who work the front desks. Guest services representatives and Transportation & Parking Services colleagues were also instrumental to the welcome, she added.

“I definitely felt a lot of excitement on Tuesday in anticipation of the athletes’ arrival and am looking forward to cheering them on as they depart to Los Angeles to start the games.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.