

Special Olympics Kansas

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NEWS RELEASE

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2014 Special Olympics North America Coach of the Year Announced *John Lair of Pittsburg, Kansas Receives Top Honor*

Mission, KS -- Special Olympics North America is honored to announce the selection of John Lair of Pittsburg, Kansas as Special Olympics North America's 2014 Coach of the Year.

The Coach of the Year Award was established in the late 1980's and is given annually to an active, certified Special Olympics coach who has met several criteria, particularly their having made a significant and demonstrable impact on local Special Olympics Programs and their communities. There are over 120,000 coaches within Special Olympics North America, providing instruction and competition in more than 32 sports. The impressive scope and contributions of all those coaches, puts the momentousness of this award into perspective.

"John embodies Special Olympics' commitment to providing every athlete with the quality coaching they deserve," said Annette Lynch, Senior Manager, Coaching Excellence & Sport Education, Special Olympics North America, adding, "what he accomplishes through his coaching is truly exemplary – he represents the best of the best amongst hundreds of thousands of excellent volunteer coaches. His technical expertise, combined with his deep commitment to, and compassion for, the athletes of Special Olympics should inspire us all to do more and reach further. His coaching and caring don't stop when the whistle blows."

John Lair began coaching in Special Olympics more than 21 years ago, but knew from a very early age about the importance of sports. He remembers putting on his first uniform, earning his letter jacket, and winning two state championship trophies for the Pittsburg community. With lessons learned from sports, Lair would excel on and off the playing field. After high school, Lair decided to end his sports career and focus on obtaining his degree from Pittsburg State University and a Master's from Missouri Southern.

While at Pittsburg State University, Lair took a recreational therapy class where the professor offered extra credit to anyone who volunteered at the local Special Olympics Spring Games. John attended and was immediately hooked, citing the experience as life changing.

He began his professional career in Pittsburg, Kansas at New Horizons in 1995 working with adults with intellectual disabilities. Most of the adults he worked with had been institutionalized from a very young age. He was more than aware that adults with intellectual disabilities often suffer isolation due to the stigma that routinely accompanies disability. New Horizons eventually expanded into New Hope Services, where Lair transitioned to be a Program Director. In 2001, he rolled up his sleeves

and took on the goal of establishing a Special Olympics team in Pittsburg. His team, the New Hope Bulldogs, served as an important bridge between people with intellectual disabilities and the broader Pittsburg community.

The success of Lair's program hinges on his view that everyone has potential and can achieve, when allowed to demonstrate their potential. Under Lair's guidance, New Hope athletes have graduated from Special Olympics' Global Messenger program (athletes formally trained in public speaking and advocacy on behalf of Special Olympics), and each athlete serves in a community leadership role for Special Olympics Kansas. In addition, a majority of the New Hope athletes are employed in the Pittsburg community, with Lair serving as their volunteer job coach.

Lair also established two nutritional education programs called Eat Right 4 Life and Bike-4-Life. These programs have been recognized by the state of Kansas and have inspired his athletes to improve their daily fitness and nutritional habits, leading to significant weight loss and improved health for many.

Lair was presented with the honor in a surprise ceremony on April 25 in Pittsburg, captured by ESPN. Surrounded by athletes, family, friends and fellow coaches, Lair stated "No one ever receives an award without help. But I will start by saying I learned from my dad that with hard work, anything is possible, and my Mom has a big heart, so I got the best of both of them. My wife MeLinda deserves the biggest thanks because she supports my passion and is always by my side. " He went on to say "This is not a John Lair award. I look at this as the New Hope Bulldog award. Our program – I will tell anyone – is the best in the country. We have some of the best volunteers that will do anything for our athletes."

Chris Hahn, President & CEO of Special Olympics Kansas presented the award and stated: "John is receiving the highest honor Special Olympics bestows upon a coach. To receive this recognition, validates his exemplary service to the Special Olympics athletes and the program. Special Olympics Kansas is very proud of John for receiving this recognition and for his tireless work on behalf of the athletes."

Pittsburg Mayor Chuck Munsell, presented a proclamation to Lair proclaiming April 25 as John Lair Day in Pittsburg.

Special Olympics athlete and Global Messenger Chevi Peters said, "John makes sure that we have the best equipment possible for whatever sport we are doing. Last year, we got new professionally stitched softball uniforms that make me feel like a MLB player. I truly know I am blessed to have John in my life and I hope everyone realizes how much of an impact he has made on so many lives. I truly respect and admire what he has done for Special Olympics Kansas, Special Olympics athletes and people with intellectual disabilities. He has changed my life in so many positive ways. I have no doubt John is the best coach and I am so glad I am part of his team."

A certified coach in 16 different year-round team and individual sports, Lair has served as the Head Coach for the New Hope Bulldogs Special Olympics team for 14 years - he and the Bulldogs only take two weeks off from competing during the year. Last year alone, Lair volunteered over 2,000 hours for Special Olympics, in addition to his full time job.

When not coaching, Lair serves as a member of Special Olympics Kansas Board of Directors, and was the first civilian elected to Kansas Law Enforcement Torch Run for Special Olympics Executive Council. He was recently appointed to the American Health Care Association as the only representative from Kansas.

Lair has received numerous local, state and national honors for his work with Special Olympics and on behalf of people with intellectual disabilities. Last year he received another high honor: being selected to serve as a powerlifting coach for Special Olympics USA. Lair will coach the 12 power lifters from throughout the U.S. who will compete at the 2015 Special Olympics World Summer Games in Los Angeles, CA, July 25 – August 2. Lair had previously served as Kansas' head coach of powerlifting at the 2006, 2010 and 2014 Special Olympics USA Games, and was a Special Olympics USA coach at the 2011 World Games in Athens, Greece.

Fifteen individuals representing the United States and Canada were named 2014 Coach of the Year finalists, and represent Special Olympics North America's most exemplary coaches - true leaders and dedicated volunteers who serve as role models to other coaches, inside and outside of Special Olympics. Finalists included Rose Antony (TX), Dave Bradshaw (MD), Megan Clodi (IL), Pat Dadey (NY), James Farr (VA), Samantha Iulo (NC), Brent Lohmer (Canada), Ron McGovern (IN), Missie Rodriguez (NH), Ronna Smith (FL), Shelley Stout (PA), Tony Vlahovic (NJ), Pete Wagner (CT), Michael White (VT), Bobbie Young (GA).

About Special Olympics Kansas

Energized by the pride and power of teamwork, Special Olympics Kansas provides individuals with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to be an athlete...and more...through acceptance, inclusion, physical fitness, health and nutrition programs and leadership development.

About Special Olympics

Special Olympics is a global movement that unleashes the human spirit through the transformative power and joy of sports, every day around the world. We empower people with intellectual disabilities to become accepted and valued members of their communities, which leads to a more respectful and inclusive society for all. Using sports as the catalyst and programming around health and education, Special Olympics is fighting inactivity, injustice and intolerance. Founded in 1968 by Eunice Kennedy Shriver, the Special Olympics movement has grown to more than 4.4 million athletes in 170 countries. With the support of more than 1.3 million coaches and volunteers, Special Olympics delivers 32 Olympic-type sports and more than 81,000 games and competitions throughout the year. Special Olympics is supported by individuals, foundations and partners, including the Christmas Records Trust, the Law Enforcement Torch Run® for Special Olympics, The Coca-Cola Company, The Walt Disney Company and ESPN, Lions Clubs International, Mattel, Microsoft, P&G, Bank of America, Essilor Vision Foundation, the B. Thomas Golisano Foundation, Finish Line, The Safeway Foundation, and Safilo Group. Visit Special Olympics at www.specialolympics.org, [Twitter@specialolympics](https://twitter.com/specialolympics), fb.com/specialolympics;

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