

NINA MOINI: Minnesota is hosting thousands of athletes, coaches, and fans this week as the Special Olympics USA games gets underway in the Twin Cities. The games brings together athletes from across the country to compete in more than a dozen sports, from swimming and gymnastics to bocce ball. Bocce ball may not be as widely known as some other sports, but for many athletes, it's a chance to compete, build confidence, and create lasting friendships. Kim Salwasser is a Special Olympics bocce coach and joins me now. Welcome to *Minnesota Now*, Kim.

KIM Thank you very much. I'm very happy to be here.

SALWASSER:

NINA MOINI: Bocce ball is a lot of fun. I can't say that I'm great at it, but it's a lot of fun. And talking with you today makes me want to go out and play. How did you come to start coaching bocce ball with the Special Olympics?

KIM Well, one of the great things about bocce ball is that you don't have to be great to play bocce ball. I've been

SALWASSER: coaching for 10 years now. And when we do competitions at the end of our practices or even at the end of our season, they all know-- our athletes know they want to play against me because I'm so horrible at it. And our athletes are amazing.

Yeah, I started this journey 10 years ago. My son played bocce ball a little bit prior to that. The couple that was running the bocce ball team for our delegation, the Blazing Stars, decided that they needed to take a little break for a while, and their child that they had that was doing Special Olympics wanted to try some other things. So my husband and I actually stepped in, and we took over the program, and we've been there ever since.

NINA MOINI: Nice. So this is the first time, though, that Minnesota has hosted the USA games while you've been coaching. What does it mean for athletes and coaches just to have an event of this size happening here?

KIM It is unbelievable. I can't even hardly put words to how amazing this experience has been so far. From when we

SALWASSER: interviewed a year ago to be a part of the team to our practices that we've been having every month with our athletes to being here, to packing our bags, to getting our gear, to riding the buses, to cheering in the tunnel when we're coming out, walking as a delegation into the stadium-- even just talking right now, I'm getting goosebumps from it because it has just been such an amazing opportunity.

People who have been here before, who've done the USA Games before, said you are not going to believe how amazing it is. And I'm going to tell everybody, you are not going to be-- you're going to be amazed how awesome it is. It's just unbelievable.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, and what about from the perspective of some of your players? How long have they been playing and training, and what are they feeling like?

KIM They are very excited to be here. Some of our athletes have been to the USA Games before, some of them in

SALWASSER: bocce, some of them in other sports. We have bowlers. We have gymnasts. We have basketball players who have been to the USA Games for those particular sports, and they just like to be able to try different things. And that's one of the great things about Special Olympics, is that they can try so many different opportunities.

We have some athletes that are what we call new with five years under their belt of bocce experience. We've got some athletes who are 15 years in. Age is not a matter either, because we've got some athletes-- we've got a 21-year-old and up to a 73-year-old. So age doesn't matter in bocce ball.

NINA MOINI: And I should have had you say at the beginning, just for folks who may be like, what's bocce ball, can you just explain what it is?

KIM
SALWASSER: Yep, absolutely. Bocce ball is a game that can be played-- traditionally, it's played on turf or on clay. You can also play on grass. It doesn't really matter. We have a court that you play on. There is a pallino. It's a white ball, traditionally. Sometimes, you'll see that it's yellow. And one player will throw the pallino and it has to get a certain distance.

And then they will throw. So if I throw the ball first or the pallino first, I get to throw my first ball, and then the person that I would be competing against would throw their ball. And so whoever has their ball closest to the pallino, they're in. So then the other team has another opportunity to try to get the ball even closer to the pallino.

And everybody gets four balls to play. And so once all eight balls are thrown, they go and measure to see how many balls are the closest of whichever player it happens to be. Our athletes compete in singles, so they compete against another athlete. Our athletes compete as a double, so there's a team of two against another team of two. And our athletes are also competing as a group in a group of four against another team of four.

NINA MOINI: OK. What about your athletes-- I mean, the ones who have been around for years now, or even people in their first go at this? What are you seeing them gain just for themselves?

KIM
SALWASSER: It's really fun to see the-- what we'll call the veterans really share their experience and their "it's OK" and "you're going to do great," and just their excitement for the games, and we're here to have fun. And then I've already started to notice-- because we left on Friday, and today's Tuesday, so we've been together about four days-- even our new players are starting to take on that veteran role and cheering on the other people. And you've got this. You're going to be great. You're amazing. And they are just so supportive of each other.

There's no hierarchy at all. We're just one team. We're one family. We've gelled together, and it's just really fun. But they support each other-- and not just each other, but they also support who they're playing against. We really practice and we really encourage to, at the end of your game, make sure to go over and congratulate the people that you played with, tell them good game, and the refs and the volunteers and everybody, because it takes all of us for this to be able to happen.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And for listeners who are excited by hearing about the games, what are some ways they can get involved with Special Olympics in Minnesota?

KIM
SALWASSER: Well, today is Tuesday. We are just finishing up our unified double matches. Tomorrow at the Larson Performance Center on the University of Minnesota campus will be our women's singles matches. And all the events-- not just bocce ball, but all of the events-- are free for the public to come and attend. You can come for five minutes if you are working near campus and have a lunch break, or you can come and stay for the day. There is plenty of things for you to do here.

Thursday, we have our men's singles. That, again, is open to the public. And then on Friday is going to be our team competition with four players on a team.

NINA MOINI: All right, Kim. Thanks so much for telling us all about it. Wishing you just continued fun at the Special Olympics.
Thank you so much.

KIM Yep, absolutely. Thank you very much.

SALWASSER:

NINA MOINI: That's Kim Salwasser, a Special Olympics bocce ball coach.