

Special Olympics offers more than competition

By **CHRIS SONTCHI**
Staff Writer

More than 1,500 mentally handicapped children and adults gathered in Chapel Hill last weekend to boost their self-esteem and just have fun at the summer games of the 1988 North Carolina Special Olympics.

The athletes, proudly sporting medals and buttons which read "I'm a hero!", competed in 30 events, ranging from swimming to team softball to track and field.

The events are organized into age categories as well as developmental skill categories to give all the athletes fair competition.

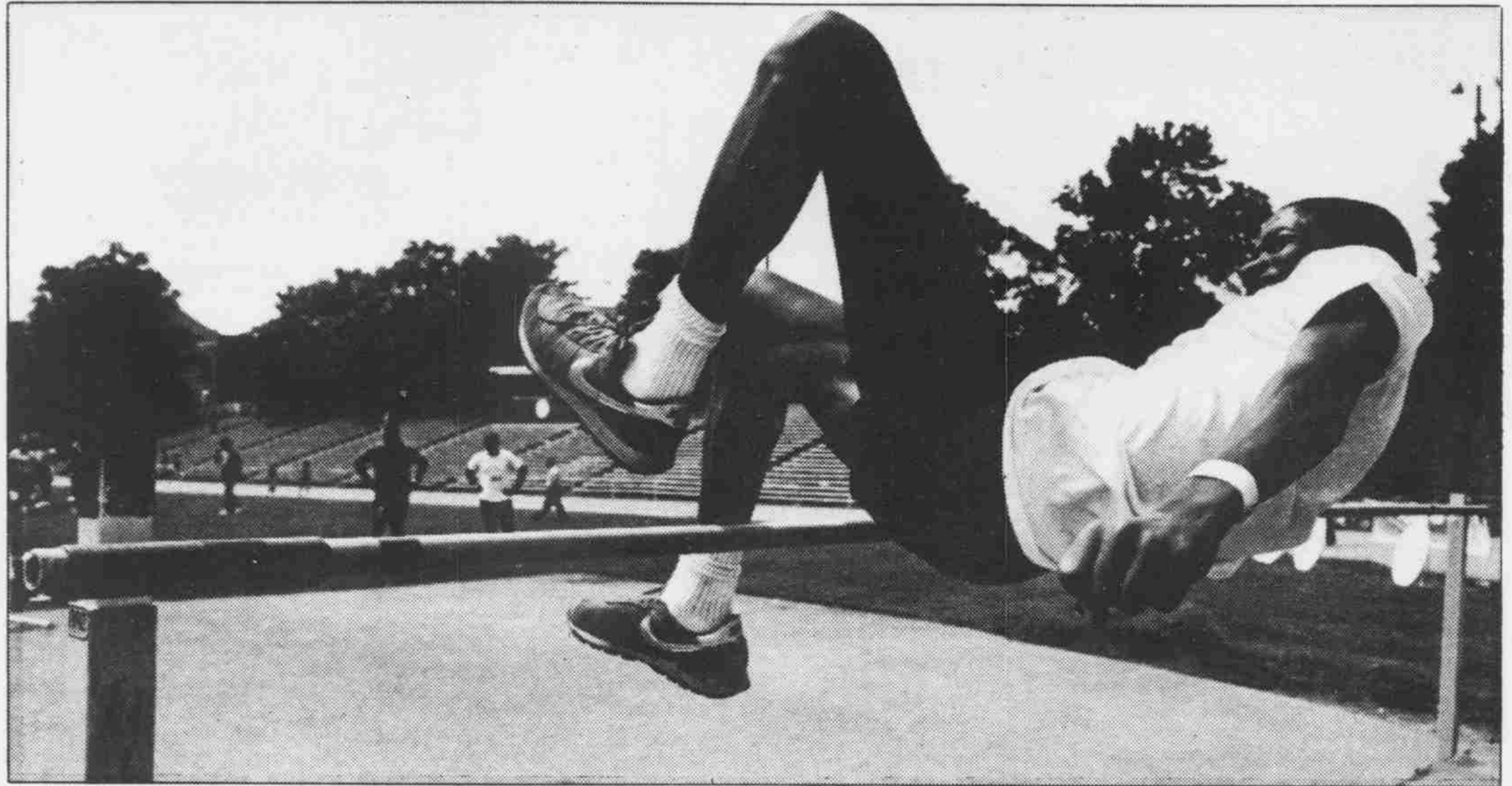
More than 1,500 volunteers devoted part, if not most, of their weekend to make sure the athletes had the time of their lives, although they were quick to add that the athletes were not the only ones enjoying themselves.

"We're having a great time and have made a lot of new friends," said Ellen Casale, a graduate student at N.C. State University and a first-year volunteer.

The Special Olympics is billed as a competition, but overall the participants are not very competitive, said third-year volunteer Jane Daunais.

"It's wonderful to see the kids stop in the middle of a race and wait for their friends to catch up so they can finish together," she said.

The goal of the Special Olympics is "to raise the self-esteem of the athletes, to let each one know how special they are," Daunais said.



Tar Heel/David Minton

A Stanley County athlete makes a successful high jump during the track and field portion of the 1988 North Carolina Special Olympics

Teams of volunteers wait at the finish line of races and at the medal ceremonies to cheer and hug the participants, she said.

Medals are awarded for first through third place, with ribbons given to all the other participants.

The skill level of the athletes surprised some volunteers, said first-year volunteer Nancy Cole.

"To see these children playing such good softball, etc., is enough to eliminate any stereotypes you might have as to the limitations of the

mentally handicapped," she said.

The athletes are supported by a large bank of family members as well. One man was spotted walking hand in hand with a child while wearing a button which read, "I'm a hero's grandfather!"

Libby Gray, the parent of an athlete, said she was "very excited and heartwarmed" about the event.

Parent Rich Caldwell said what the Special Olympics meant to the participants and their families was "more than words can say."

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