

Thousands mark the close of the Special Olympics World Games in L.A.

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The caldron no longer burns in the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, where thousands gathered Sunday to mark the end of the 2015 Special Olympics World Games.

After eight days of competition — including golfing in Griffith Park, basketball at USC's Galen Center and sailing near Belmont Pier in Long Beach — the 6,500 athletes and their coaches paraded into the crowded stadium, waving flags and snapping selfies along the route to their seats.

The athletes from Ireland, clad in green with flecks of orange, belted out the soccer chant "Ole, ole, ole." Those from Colombia, decked out in canary yellow with woven sombreros, handed out pins bearing the national flag. Many high-fived Los Angeles police Officer Jose Saldana, one of the many LAPD officers patrolling the games this week.

Not all took home a gold, silver or bronze medal. But every athlete was given a ribbon, which many affixed with pins and buttons from other nations.

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From the stands, Susan and Musa Abdelshife and their 21-year-old son, Tariq Abdelshife, who has special needs, cheered on the athletes as they marched into the Coliseum.

Surveying more than a few empty seats around her, Susan Abdelshife couldn't help but draw a sharp contrast between the Special Olympics and other sporting events, which bring more crowds but seem tainted by oversize paychecks and the prospects of fame.

"If people didn't come, they missed the most amazing event. It's not about money, it's not about prestige here," she said, noting that her son came from their home in El Segundo to cheer on friends who were competing in gymnastics. "These kids are out here doing their best for the love of the sport."

Billed as the largest-ever gathering of nations in the city, this year's event included athletes and

coaches from 165 countries. The 1984 Summer Olympics played host to 140 countries.

The games have come a long way since 1962, when Eunice Kennedy Shriver launched "Camp Shriver" for those who had an intellectual disability like her older sister. Six years later, the first international Special Olympics were held in Chicago.

Shriver believed sports could break down barriers and unite communities, and she wanted to ensure her sister and others like her could pursue their physical talents.

Now, the movement serves 4 million people around the world and cities eagerly bid to serve as host to the event. Organizers say the L.A. Games brought more than 500,000 spectators and infused \$400 million into the local economy — benefits that will next accrue for Styria, a state in southeast Austria that is hosting the Special Olympics World Winter Games in 2017.

This year's games featured competition in 25 sports, including equestrian, judo, kayaking and roller skating. After tallying the results, organizers said the athletes shattered 27 world records.

One "game-changer" this year, Special Olympics Chief Executive Janet Froetscher said, was the extensive coverage by sports broadcasting giant ESPN.

"You all saw yourselves on ESPN, didn't you?" Froetscher said Sunday to the athletes in the Coliseum before she officially closed the games. "They told your story.... They made their audience look at you inspired and in tears."

To make it to the world stage, athletes must have medaled in a state or regional competition, commit to six weeks of training in their sport and be at least 8 years old. Special consideration is given to those who have never attended before.

For Julio Cuentas, the swimming coach for Peru, the games have been "very tiring" but fun, he said. He beamed as he recited the medals won by Peru's 45 athletes: 12 gold medals, eight silver and 12 bronze. But he was quick to caution that the medals are not the main objective.

"I won't forget these moments," he said. "All the colors and all the races are here. The world is changing because the light is here," he said, pointing to his swimming team. "All of this is the light, each one."

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