

Special Olympics team first to win U.S. gold in men's soccer

by JEFF NEWMAN, Staff writer

Olympians are a rare breed. But an entire soccer team of them is native to St. Mary's County.

Nearly two months after it won gold at the 2011 Special Olympics World Summer Games in Athens with a 2-1 victory over Spain, the U.S. men's soccer team comprised entirely of players from St. Mary's assembled the morning of Aug. 26 at Chancellor's Run Regional Park for a little due recognition from Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md., 5th).

"The gold medal winners," Hoyer said as he began shaking hands with each player inside the park's Softball Hall of Fame. "Wow."

The congressman had already congratulated the 10-member team during a July 19 address on the floor of the House of Representatives, but said he wished to commend the team in person, as well.

"I am so incredibly proud to be here with you," Hoyer said. "St. Mary's County is proud and the country is proud of what you have done. It's very rare that you get to meet the best of the best, and that's what you guys are."

Team members include Avery Long, Larry Mills, Brandon Chan, Thomas Smith, Shaun Ridley, Terrell Nowlin, Sam Huffman, Wesley Thompson, Steven Summerfelt and ace

goalie Alan Hill, who led Division 5 with only two goals allowed during the 2011 World Games.

"To think that in St. Mary's County our team went to Greece, where the Olympics started a very long time ago, and was the best in the world," Hoyer stated, cueing a reaction from Shaun's mother, Bobbie Ridley of California.

"Yes!" she exclaimed.

"Fired up!" Hoyer roared back, impressed with the enthusiasm.

Three of the players could not make it to the ceremony — Hill and Thompson were at work and Summerfelt was recovering from recent knee surgery. "These athletes are always getting surgery on their knee," Hoyer said.

The congressman read aloud the address he entered into the congressional record, which made note of perhaps the most impressive aspect of the team's gold-medal victory — it was the first ever by a U.S. men's soccer team in the Special Olympics.

"Not only were you the best in the world, you were the best to ever play for the United States," Hoyer said. "That's awesome." Teams from Maryland won a total of 10 medals, eight of them gold, at the 2011 World Games.

The speech also included a brief recap of the July 2 gold-medal match, during which Long scored both of Team USA's goals. "Avery," Hoyer said, giving him a thumbs up. "Way to go."

A senior running back at Leonardtown High School, Long had never touched a soccer ball before he succumbed to peer pressure and joined the Special Olympic team.

Hoyer also credited Mary Lu Bucci, county director for the Special Olympics, and coaches John Toner and Ken Cohen for their devotion to the team.

"They do this because they care about you, they care about competition and they care about you being the best you can be, and you were," he told the players. "Best in the world is the best you can be."

Following a team photo with Hoyer and Del. John Bohanan (D-St. Mary's), the congressman signed a copy of the address for each player.

"I'm a huge fan of our president, President Obama," Shawn Ridley said as Hoyer signed his certificate.

"Me, too," Hoyer answered. "I'll tell him you said that."

The congressman often mentions his support for the disabled during public appearances and is close with the family of the late Special Olympics founder, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, who was married to Peace Corps founder and Maryland native R. Sargent Shriver, who died Jan. 18.

A sponsor of the 1990 legislation Americans with Disabilities Act, Hoyer took issue with the term "disabled," remarking that he might be considered "disabled" at basketball due to a lack of height or sufficient athleticism, "but there's a lot of things I can do.

"Drop that 'dis,'" he continued. "We 'dis' too many people. Find out what a person's abilities are."

Faced with a struggling economy and mounting federal debt, members of Congress have spent recent months quarreling with each other and the White House over where to best find savings. Well aware that social programs are often among the first to feel the fiscal ax when cuts are made to government budgets, Hoyer maintained that any budget balancing should include tax hikes on the wealthy .

"Those that are most vulnerable in our society should be the last ones to get cut," Hoyer said. "It's those with the most who should be making the largest contribution, not those with the least."

As for the local Olympians, Hoyer's visit is far from the last recognition they will receive.

Hoyer gives St. Mary's athletes the Olympic treatment

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Following a Sept. 21 appearance at RFK Stadium during a D.C. United soccer match, the team will also be honored at St. Mary's College of Maryland during its Oct. 1 homecoming.