

New Mexicans compete in North American Indigenous Games

Written by Molly Ann Howell Managing Editor
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With the hot Canadian sun beating down on them, Indigenous athletes from all over the world competed in the 10th annual North American Indigenous Games July 15-23 in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The Games were founded in the '70s. This year, over 756 Indigenous nations participated in the competition.

Eighty-seven students from New Mexico competed in "Athletics" competition of the Games, and six of those students were from the Gallup-McKinley County Schools district.

These athletes were chosen based on their times in competitions at home.

Gallup's cross country coach Kyle Benally was one of New Mexico's assistant coaches. He got to pick the athletes that would make up the New Mexico team. In doing so, he had to consider who would be the best fit for each race.

Benally has been with many of the GMCS athletes that competed in the Games since they started cross country. In an interview with the *Sun*, he talked about how great it was to see his athletes compete.

"The best part was honestly seeing them perform at their peak in an international competition,"

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he said. "Seeing them win medals they honestly didn't think they had a chance to win and being so proud to see them on the podium for almost every race we were in [was the best part]."

Three of the six GMCS athletes medaled in the competition.

Gallup High School freshman Mykeia Vicenti won four gold medals: one in the women's 2K Cross Country race, another in the women's 1,200-meter race, another in the 800-meter race, and a final one in 4x400 meter relay as a part of the New Mexico team. She won a silver medal as part of the relay team that participated in the 4x100 meter relay.

She said the 800-meter race was the "scariest" race she's ever competed in.

"It was definitely a great opportunity to go compete, especially [in Canada. I got to see] how fast other people are. I did have somewhat of a competition, especially in the 800, that was the scariest race I had out there," Vicenti said. "I won by about 0.1 second, I barely beat [one girl]."

When she wasn't competing Vicenti said she enjoyed meeting the other athletes, especially the girls from other New Mexico schools.

"I consider them family now, and some of them even sisters," she said.

Building sister-like relationships was great for Vicenti because a lot of her family members weren't able to make the trip to Canada. Her brothers and sister usually watch her race when the competitions are in New Mexico. Her mother was able to travel with her, but she was the only family member present; everyone else watched the competitions from home.

Tohatchi High senior Jared Peterson won a silver medal in the 800-meter race and a bronze in the 4x100 meter relay.

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Like Vicenti, he also commented on the different level of competition the international games provided.

“My favorite part about competing was that I actually had competition,” he said.

Gallup High School senior Theodore RoundFace won two bronze medals: one in the men’s 8K Cross Country race and another in the men’s 3K. He placed fifth in the 800-meter race.

“My favorite part about competing in the games was the atmosphere and the people there,” he said. “The competition was pretty fun too.”

All three athletes were honored during the Sept. 25 GMCS school board meeting.

“I could go on for days about all three of these athletes,” Benally said during the meeting.

He praised each one individually, starting with Peterson.

“I look forward to seeing how much he can achieve as time progresses when he goes off to run at the collegiate level,” the coach said.

Next, he spoke about RoundFace.

“To see him blossom into the athlete he is today is truly amazing to see,” Benally said. “He has taken everything that we have given him in terms of what things to eat, in terms of his nutrition and performance, to sleeping.”

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Despite being the youngest competitor for GMCS, Benally said Vicenti's future looked bright.

"She's already blossoming into the athlete everybody already knows she can be and then some," Benally said.

Benally said he's very excited for the next step in these athletes' careers. He noted that this is just the beginning for many of them.

"This just opened the door for a lot of these athletes to push themselves to another level, because it's not just local competitions anymore, it's international competitions that could possibly open more doors to the Olympic trials or anything else that is coming down in their direction," Benally said. "I'm just fortunate enough to be able to help them walk through the first initial door."

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