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Shooting sports get reprieve, but all is not well

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Bill Diana of Middletown is 53 years old and as happy as a teen-ager. Why? Because he's going to make his debut at the Empire State Games this week.

"This is a chance of a lifetime, to make it to the Olympics," albeit on the state level, Diana said. "I've been dancing around like a young kid for days."

Only a month ago, his dream would have been unattainable. A cost-cutting decision by the executives of the Games eliminated shooting from the multi-sport competition, as well as water polo, open women's field hockey and fencing.

"I felt very, very hurt," said Mount Hope's Bill Mielke, who had been active as a shooter and coach for the past 20 years. "I really think the Games are one of the best things that New York state does, especially for the young people."

So rather than voice one complaint about being banished and going away silently, the competitive shooting community went into action.

Hundreds of phone calls and letters were filed away to politicians, who then lobbied successfully to have shooting reinstated for the 2003 Games in Buffalo.

"It's great. Everybody is glad to have it," said state shooting chairman Chuck Meyer.

Not all is well, though. The shotgun events will not be included in this year's Games, and the number of competitors is down to about 80 from the maximum allowed of 96 for the rifle and pistol events. "We lost some because they couldn't quite make changes in their work plans and vacation plans," Meyer said.

Also, shooters will not be housed or transported to and from the Games so they will have to pick up their own costs. The Games will provide only a uniform shirt, hat and medals.

Mielke said he was able to pull together only a three-man rapid fire pistol team for this week's event, with free pistol and women's sports pistol going by the wayside. Mielke, 69, Diana and David Valachovic of Wappingers Falls make up the pistol team.

Diana will coach a junior team consisting of Middletown area shooters Jenna Hansen, Jay Hansen, Ashley Alston, Nicholas Bertucci and Matt Golben.

The Middletown Pistol and Rifle Association has donated \$1,000 to offset the costs for lodging, transportation and meals.

Meyer is still unclear about why his sport was eliminated in the first place. The reasons offered to him included the high costs of renting shooting ranges, moving the equipment to the sites and providing security at the sites; the high costs of providing transportation to out-of-the-way ranges; a reduction in the number of entrants at regional tryouts; and, the fact that the same people compete every year. There is also an underlying notion, offered by several competitors, that eliminating shooting was a decision based on "political correctness."

Executive director Fred Smith said there have been financial cutbacks in the entire Games program.

"I hate to see our numbers go down at all," Smith said, "but the other side of the coin is we absolutely have to do so within a budget."

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