

## COOL FUNDRAISER

# Super plunge weekend at Hampton Beach

Hundreds to take ocean dip to benefit Special Olympics

By Jack Shea

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HAMPTON — The Patriots may be done for the season, but that doesn't mean that Super Bowl weekend can't be fun and exciting on the Seacoast.

Hundreds of people include those from Exeter and the greater Epping area will charge into the frigid waters of Hampton Beach for the eighth annual High School Plunge on Feb. 6 and for the 17th annual Penguin Plunge on Feb. 7 in support of the Special Olympics New Hampshire (SONH). Both events start at noon and are currently expected to draw roughly 600 participants each, many of whom have raised hundreds — even thousands — of dollars in donations for the cause. And yes, it's going to be cold.

But while the icy ocean temperatures might seem intimidating, the event's festive feel is sure to exude a sense of warmth that will help swimmers combat the cold.

"You have so much adrenaline from this amazing event," said Winnacunnet High School senior and veteran Plunger Lindsay Baxter. "There are hundreds of people on the beach and everyone's so excited that you don't even really feel the cold."

Participants' enthusiasm will also be fueled by the themes of each event. Saturday includes a "Hawaiian Luau" costume theme, and Sunday will see the plungers dressing in USA attire, and will also include a costume contest and parade. Afterwards, this

year's top fund-raiser will be crowned King Penguin.

In addition to its "super-fun atmosphere," Bridget Carleton, Special Olympics New Hampshire director of operations, said that the event's cause also plays a big role in the excitement.

"People have seen how our organization is able to change people's lives," said Carleton. "And it's something they can check off their bucket lists."

With the rising number of participants and donations from past years, Carleton said she is hopeful that the organization will raise \$675,000 over the course of the weekend, and many participants are also working hard to reach their fundraising goals.

Baxter, who was the event's highest fundraiser in the High School Plunge for the past two years, says that she is working hard to top her numbers from last year. She said that she is getting close to reaching her current \$9,000 goal, for which she has been collecting since October. An athlete herself, Baxter is motivated by her passionate support for the Special Olympics.

"I always tell people that the Special Olympics allow people with intellectual disabilities to feel the heat of competition and the warmth of success," said Baxter. "I really think it's important for everyone to compete in their own way."

Exeter High School physical education teacher Jim Tufts, who runs the Exeter Special Olympics, said that he believes the games are not

only important for their competitive aspects, but for their socialization opportunities for both athletes and volunteer peer coaches from local high schools. Although Tufts said he will be glad to be out of the cold, he is looking forward to taking the annual plunge for a good cause.

"It's always great to see so many familiar faces and be together and all take the plunge," said Tufts. "It's fun."

For many people, Plunge weekend is an annual tradition. Sun Valley resident Kevin Reusch is about to take his 16th plunge, and said that he enjoys the community aspects of the event.

"It's amazing to see some of the same people every year with the same enthusiasm understanding the value that this day has to this program," said Reusch.

The water may be cold, but for Reusch, a few frozen moments are well worth it.

"It's such a nice cause," said Reusch. "For me to go in the ocean for a quick dip in February, that's nothing."

