

Inclusion of young people with intellectual disabilities in Europe through Special Olympics Unified Sports



An Evaluation of A Unified Sports® Football Pilot Project

There is growing support in European societies for the total inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in all aspects of the community. The drive towards full inclusion is particularly evident in the move away from special schools towards inclusive educational settings in many countries.

Sport provides a means for supporting this integration process.

“Sport can make a difference in everybody’s life, contributing to the integration of people into society”

-- Jan Figel, European Commissioner in charge of Education and Culture

Unified Sports is one mechanism for promoting social inclusion through sport. Unified Sports is a Special Olympics initiative that provides opportunities for sportsmen with intellectual disabilities (called Athletes) and without intellectual disabilities (called Partners) to play on integrated sport teams. This experience allows athletes and partners to develop sport skills, have meaningful competition experiences, and create long lasting friendships.

In 2005, Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia developed a school-based pilot project that merged the Special Olympics school curriculum *SO Get Into It®* with Special Olympics Unified Football. The goals of this pilot project were to improve the sport skills, social skills, and self-esteem of students with and without intellectual disabilities. In addition, the project aimed to improve the understanding and acceptance of students without disabilities towards people with intellectual disabilities.

Pilot project description

In early 2005, Special Olympics Program staff in Austria, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia approached schools to participate in the *SO Get Into It* & Unified football pilot project. During the spring, schools implemented the *SO Get Into It* curriculum and in the summer of 2005, students with and without intellectual disabilities were recruited to form Unified football teams. The teams trained at least once a week and competed regularly at the local, regional, and national levels in 7-a-side Unified football over the 2005-2006 school year.

Countries participating	Number of teams	Number of Students
Austria	11	110
Poland	23	240
Romania	14	140
Serbia	32	320
Slovakia	15	150

Evaluating the Unified football pilot project

Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia and Special Olympics, Inc. commissioned the Special Olympics Global Collaborating Center (GCC) at the University of Massachusetts Boston to implement a comprehensive evaluation of this pilot project. Coreen Harada and Jennifer Norins Bardon served as investigators on the evaluation.

The evaluation documented the impact of the pilot project on athletes’ and partners’ sport skills, social skills, and self-esteem through interviews of athletes and partners, as well as surveys of family members and coaches. In addition, the evaluation considered the extent to which the pilot project promoted greater understanding and acceptance of people with intellectual disabilities and facilitated social relationships between athletes and partners. This brief focuses on athletes’ and partners’ perspectives.

During the spring of 2006, a total of 564 Unified football athletes and partners from 46 teams representing five countries were interviewed individually during designated team sessions. Teams were primarily composed of boys between the ages of 12-15. With the exception of athletes and partners from Austria, which has an integrated education system, athletes attended special schools and partners attended regular schools.

These interviews focused on different aspects of athletes’ and partners’ Unified football experiences, including training and competition, challenge and effort, and personal goals. In addition, athletes and partners were asked about their reasons for joining the team, improvement in sport skills and self-esteem, and social interaction with teammates outside of training and competition. Partners were asked additional questions about their perceptions of the effort and challenges experienced by athletes during training and competition.

Results

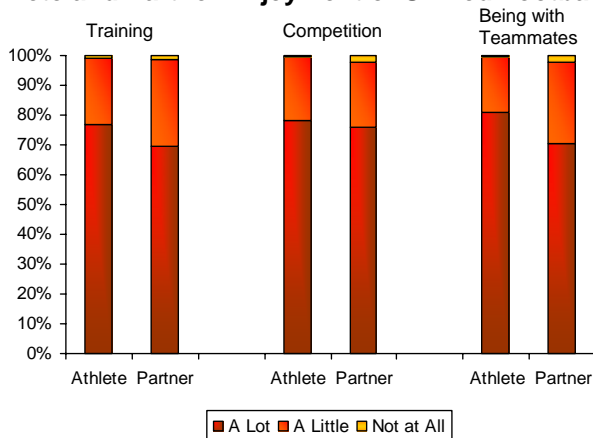
The results presented in this brief are from data collected from athletes and partners in all five countries involved in the pilot project. Because of little difference between countries, the percentages cited are averaged across countries.

Athletes and partners value their Unified football experience

Over the course of the school year, athletes and partners were satisfied with all aspects of their Unified football experience.

- ❖ Most athletes and partners (over 75% for both) enjoyed training, competing, and spending time with their teammates.

Athlete and Partner Enjoyment of Unified Football

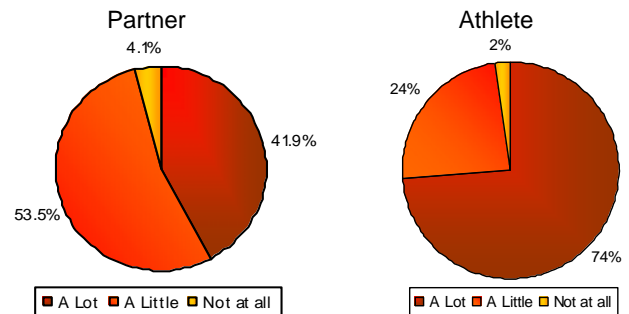


When considering the specific aspects of training and competition, it was clear that Unified football provided a challenging sport environment focused on fair play and teamwork. Athletes and partners felt that being on a Unified football team was a valuable opportunity for them to contribute to shared goals, be challenged, and rise to that by playing to the best of their abilities.

- ❖ Athletes (64%) and partners (62%) alike believed that they played to their best all of the time.
- ❖ Partners felt challenged all (43%) or some (52%) of the time during training.
- ❖ Nearly half of partners (47%) believed that they made a large contribution to their team's performance.

- ❖ Most partners, when asked to reflect on the efforts of the athletes on their teams, reported that athletes played their best all of the time (70%), that athletes were challenged during training a lot of the time (49%), and that they contributed a lot to their team's performance (73%).

Partner and Athlete Contributions to Team (Rated by Partners)



Like all sportsmen, Unified athletes and partners had personal objectives for competition. These objectives were both individual and team-oriented, and could be related to achievement or enjoyment.

- ❖ At the individual level, athletes rated the most important aspects of competition as having fun (54%), teamwork (52%), and fair play (42%). For partners, the most important aspects were teamwork (50%), fair play (44%), and having fun (40%). Winning was the least important factor for athletes (41%) and partners (22%).
- ❖ Similarly, at the team level, athletes and partners rated fair play and teamwork as the most important objectives during competition.

"I also play in a professional youth football club. But I like more playing on the Unified team. Here football is much more fun and it is not all about winning, winning, winning."

-- Partner, Romania

Partners felt that their most valuable contribution to team performance was facilitating fair play. They felt that it was a part of their role on the team to ensure that athletes had equal opportunities to participate fully in team play.

"I am happy on the team, we are all about the same level of playing".

-- Athlete, Poland

"Athletes contribute a lot to the team..."

-- Partner, Austria



Athletes and partners have quality experiences in Unified football

Like any sportsman, Unified football athletes and partners had a variety of reasons for joining their Unified teams. The most frequently cited factors included skill development and friendship.

- ❖ Most athletes said they joined Unified football so that they could learn new football skills (85%).
- ❖ Many partners joined because they wanted to play football on a team (60%).
- ❖ Many athletes (60%) and partners (40%) joined a Unified football team because their friends were playing.
- ❖ Many athletes joined because they wanted to make new friends (66%).
- ❖ Some partners spontaneously stated that they joined Unified football because they wanted to learn more about people with intellectual disabilities (7%).

Unified football provided athletes and partners with opportunities to learn and demonstrate sport skills. Both athletes and partners felt that they improved in that area.

- ❖ Athletes and partners reported that their football skills improved a lot (46%) or a little (46%).

Self-esteem was also an important area of improvement for athletes and partners. This was especially important for athletes, as they perceived more improvement in self-esteem than partners.

- ❖ Many athletes reported that they felt a lot (53%) or a little (34%) better about themselves after being involved with Unified football.
- ❖ Partners reported that they felt a lot (38%) or a little (30%) better about themselves.

Sport provides a venue for players to develop social relationships that can extend beyond the playing field. While this is not a primary objective in most organized sport programs, promoting social inclusion through sport was a unique component of this Unified football pilot program.

- ❖ Many athletes (41%) and partners (39%) reported that they spent time with teammates, across disability status, outside of team training and competitions.
- ❖ The most common activities that athletes and partners did together outside of Unified training and competition were playing sports and “hanging out.”

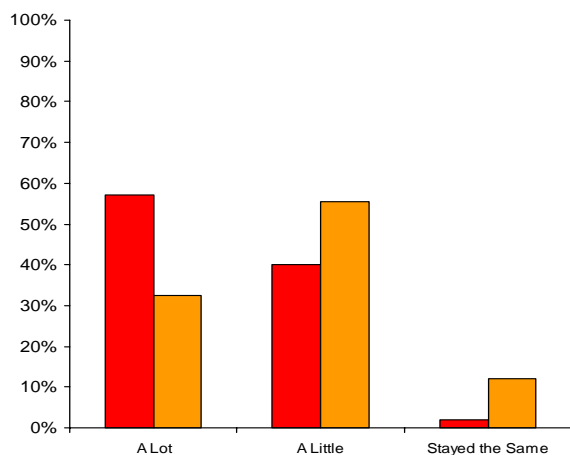
“It was very easy to play football together on the team. It was new and very exciting for me and my friends from the special school. Now we are all friends on the team from special and regular school...”

-- Athlete, Romania

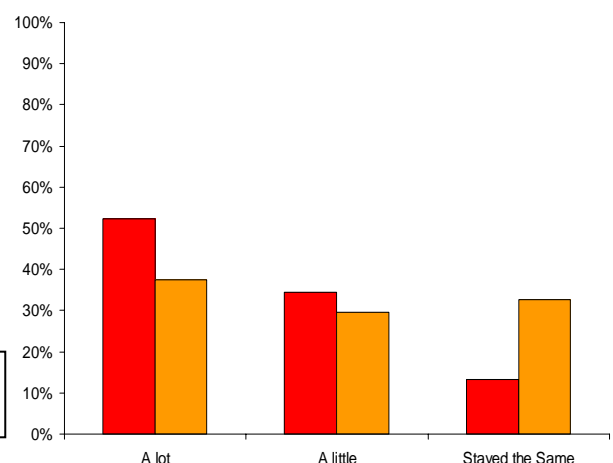
Through their interactions with athletes both on and off the football pitch, partners gained valuable insights about their teammates with intellectual disabilities. Partners stated that athletes were “actually very similar to us” and “they are cool.” Partners learned that athletes with intellectual disabilities “are capable of playing good football”.

- ❖ For many partners, Unified football was also their first experience interacting with people with intellectual disabilities (57%).
- ❖ Most partners said their understanding of people with intellectual disabilities improved a lot (50%) or a little (29%).

Athlete and Partner Improvement in Sport Skills



Athlete and Partner Improvement in Self-Esteem





Summary and Conclusions

The Unified football pilot project was implemented in five countries with over 900 participating students, both with and without intellectual disabilities. The evaluation of this pilot project documented the impact of Unified football on athletes and partners in sport skills, social skills, self-esteem, and social interaction, as well as partners' understanding of their peers with intellectual disabilities.

The findings of this evaluation reflect the unique perspectives and experiences of the individuals involved in the project – the sportsmen themselves. This evaluation gave a voice to athletes and partners who participated in weekly training and regular competitions throughout the past year. Looking at the results from the survey and at the quotes from athletes and partners it can be stated they:

- ❖ **Made significant gains through participating in Unified football, including learning new sport skills and increasing their self-esteem;**
- ❖ **Made friends with teammates across disability status;**
- ❖ **Greatly enjoyed all aspects of their Unified football experience – training, competition, and spending time with teammates;**
- ❖ **Were challenged and played to the best of their abilities during training and competition;**
- ❖ **Felt that they made important contributions to their team's performance;**
- ❖ **Placed teamwork, fun, and fair play ahead of winning.**

These findings suggest that this model of Unified football has been successful in promoting social inclusion. Though separated by their educational settings, these students with and without intellectual disabilities have come together on the playing field to learn about sport and one another.

The Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia Unified Football Pilot Project was supported by



The presented research was supported by Special Olympics International through a cooperative agreement (No. U59/CCU321826) with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The views expressed are those of the authors and not of the CDC.

We would like to extend our thanks to the Special Olympics National Programs that participated in the project and an in the evaluation: Special Olympics Austria, Special Olympics Poland, Special Olympics Romania, Special Olympics Serbia, Special Olympics Slovakia.

This brief is a preliminary report on the evaluation of the Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia Unified Football Pilot Project. The final report will be available in early 2007. For further information on the project, please contact Sabine Brecklinghaus at Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia: SBrecklinghaus@specialolympics.org

I have never thought that regular students can show so much support and can be so good friends with our students from the special school. Usually our students were teased by the kids from the regular school."

--Special School PE Teacher, Slovakia