



Special Olympics Milestones

June 1962

Eunice Kennedy Shriver begins a summer day camp at her home in Maryland for children with intellectual disabilities to realize their capabilities in sports and physical activities.

July 1968

The first International Special Olympics Summer Games are held at Soldier Field in Chicago, Illinois, USA. 1000 individuals with intellectual disabilities from 26 states and Canada compete in track and field and swimming.

December 1971

The U.S. Olympic Committee gives Special Olympics official approval as one of only two organizations authorized to use the name "Olympics" in the United States.

February 1977

Steamboat Springs, Colorado, hosts the first International Special Olympics Winter Games, with more than 500 athletes competing in skiing and skating events. U.S. television networks CBS, ABC & NBC cover the Games.

June 1981

The Law Enforcement Torch Run for Special Olympics is launched in Wichita, Kansas, USA, after Police Chief Richard LaMunyon saw an urgent need to raise awareness for Special Olympics. The Torch Run is now Special Olympics' largest grassroots fundraiser, raising nearly \$40 million annually.

September 1986

The United Nations in New York City launches the International Year of Special Olympics under the banner "Special Olympics—Uniting the World."

October 1987

"A Very Special Christmas," a benefit album featuring holiday music by top performers is released worldwide. Produced by Jimmy and Vicki Iovine of A&M Records and Bobby Shriver, all proceeds benefit Special Olympics. More than two million records, compact discs and cassette tapes are sold.

February 1988

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) signs an historic agreement with Sargent and Eunice Kennedy Shriver, in which the IOC officially endorses and recognizes Special Olympics.



July 1988

Special Olympics Unified Sports® is launched at the annual Special Olympics Conference in Reno, Nevada, and Lake Tahoe, California. Athletes with and without intellectual disabilities compete side-by-side in bowling, volleyball and softball.

March 1993

The fifth Special Olympics World Winter Games (**Games officially re-named 'World' instead of 'international' games in 1991*) are hosted in the Austrian cities of Salzburg and Schladming, the first World Winter Games held outside North America.

July 1995

A number of new initiatives make their debut at the Ninth Special Olympics World Summer Games held in New Haven, Connecticut, including the Host Town Program, Healthy Athletes® and Research and Policy Symposia. For the first time, individuals with intellectual disabilities serve as certified sports officials.

January 1997

Healthy Athletes® becomes an official Special Olympics initiative, providing health care services to Special Olympics athletes worldwide. The program includes free vision, hearing and dental screenings; injury prevention clinics and nutrition education.

July 1998

Special Olympics celebrates its 30th anniversary with the introduction of the Special Olympics Sargent Shriver International Global Messengers, 12 athletes who travel the world as spokespeople.

December 1998

U.S. President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton host “A Very Special Christmas from Washington D.C.”—marking the first time that the White House hosts a Special Olympics gala and the first time that artists from the “A Very Special Christmas” album series gather together to perform. In 2000, President and Mrs. Clinton host “A Very Special Christmas” for the second time.

May 2000

The “Campaign for Special Olympics” sets unprecedented goals to increase athlete participation by 1 million and to raise more than \$120 million over the course of the next five years, changing the face of Special Olympics.

May 2000

As part of the “Campaign for Special Olympics,” the Special Olympics China Millennium March is launched; the Movement’s most ambitious growth campaign in history. China pledges to increase its current number of athletes from 50,000 to 500,000 by 2005.

May 2001

The first-ever Global Athlete Congress takes place in The Hague, Netherlands. Special Olympics athletes from every region in the world come together to discuss the future of the Special Olympics movement. Despite differences in language, culture, age and gender they hold discussions, challenge existing ideas and vote on new resolutions.



July 2001

The South African cities of Cape Town, Johannesburg and Sun City host Special Olympics African Hope. President Nelson Mandela returns to Robben Island with Special Olympics athletes to light the “*Flame of Hope*” and kick off the Law Enforcement Torch Run® through the streets of Cape Town. The event generates awareness of Special Olympics throughout the continent and launches a major growth initiative to reach 100,000 new athletes in Africa by 2005.

October 2001

Special Olympics develops and distributes So Get Into It® kits for students with and without disabilities to schools and teachers worldwide at no cost. They teach young people about intellectual disabilities while empowering them to “be the difference.” The lessons highlight values of inclusion, acceptance and respect.

July 2002

The Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund partners with Special Olympics to host an annual birthday celebration for its founder and chairperson, President of South Africa Nelson Mandela, and helps Special Olympics launch its Unified Sports® program in South Africa.

June 2003

Ireland hosts the first Special Olympics World Summer Games held outside the United States. With 5,500 athletes participating, it is Ireland’s largest sporting event of the year, capturing the hearts and imaginations of an entire nation.

June 2003

Special Olympics releases “The Multinational Study of Attitudes toward Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities,” a report on how people across the world view the roles and capabilities of persons with intellectual disabilities in the workplace, classroom and in daily life. The study is the most comprehensive ever conducted on this subject.

October 2004

U.S. President George W. Bush signs the “Special Olympics Sport and Empowerment Act,” which authorizes \$15 million per year over five years to fund the growth of Special Olympics and support initiatives that foster greater respect and understanding for people with intellectual disabilities. The signing of the bill marks the first time that Special Olympics secures support through legislation.

December 2005

“The Ringer,” a Farrelly Brothers film starring Johnny Knoxville, opens in theaters throughout Canada and the United States. The film includes appearances from more than 150 Special Olympics athletes. Its producers collaborated with Special Olympics to challenge destructive stereotypes and negative thinking about people with intellectual disabilities.

December 2005

Special Olympics surpasses its goal of doubling the number of athletes worldwide to 2.5 million participants. With sports at the core, Special Olympics stands as a leader in advancing rights and opportunities for its athletes in 165 countries.



June 2006

In celebration of the 85th birthday of founder Eunice Kennedy Shriver, President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush host a tribute dinner at the White House to honor Special Olympics.

October 2007

The city of Shanghai, China, hosts the 12th Special Olympics World Summer Games, which are broadcast internationally on an unprecedented scale. These Games, with more than 7,500 athletes from 164 countries participating, are a major milestone in Special Olympics' history.

February 2009

Special Olympics World Winter Games are hosted in Boise, Idaho; stemming from grassroots youth activation at those games the 'Spread the Word to End the Word Campaign' is founded by college students Soeren Palumbo (Notre Dame 2011) and Timbo Shriver (Yale 2011) and continues to be led by passionate young people to raise the consciousness of society about the hurtful effects of the R-word.

May 2009

The U.S. National Portrait Gallery unveils a portrait of Eunice Kennedy Shriver, the founder of Special Olympics. It is the first portrait the Gallery has ever commissioned of an individual who has not served as a U.S. President or First Lady.

August 2009

Special Olympics mourns the loss of founder Eunice Kennedy Shriver who died surrounded by her family in Massachusetts. Letters and messages celebrating her contribution to humanity pour in from world leaders and everyday people around the world.

November 2009

"A Very Special Christmas 7" is released, infusing the holiday record series with the energy and talent of a new generation of music stars.

June 2010

The Special Olympics Global Congress is held in Marrakech, Morocco, bringing together hundreds of Movement leaders from countries around the world to chart the next five years of work.

July 2010

Thanks to longtime partner Coca-Cola, Special Olympics athletes from across the globe play alongside football legends and other celebrities in a Unified football match at the Greene Point Stadium in Cape Town, South Africa, before the FIFA World Cup quarter final.

September 2010

The first Eunice Kennedy Shriver Day is held in countries around the world to celebrate the vision of the founder of Special Olympics and to accelerate the momentum of the organization.



December 2010

Movement leaders release the Special Olympics Strategic Plan 2011-2015, a visionary document that will guide Special Olympics growth over the next five years.

January 2011

Special Olympics mourns the death of Sargent Shriver, husband of late founder Eunice Kennedy Shriver and Chairman of the Board Emeritus. Shriver served as president of the Movement from 1984 through 1996 and served as Chairman of the Board of Directors from 1990 to 2003.

June-July 2011

The 2011 Special Olympics World Summer Games are held in Athens, Greece. 7,000 athletes from around the world gather to compete in the birthplace of the Olympics—demonstrating to the world just how far Special Olympics has come.

September 2012

U.S. businessman and philanthropist B. Thomas Golisano gives Special Olympics the largest gift ever from an individual donor – US\$12 million – to launch the Healthy Communities initiative in eight countries – Kazakhstan, Malawi, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru, Romania, South Africa and Thailand – and six U.S. states – Arizona, Florida, Kansas, New Jersey, New York and Wisconsin.

December 2012

“A Very Special Christmas,” holiday benefit album series marks its 25th anniversary, celebrating more than \$100 million generated to benefit Special Olympics worldwide.

February 2013

The 2013 Special Olympics World Winter Games are held in PyeongChang, Korea. The Games featured more than 2,300 athletes from more than 110 countries.

July 2013

Lions Clubs International Foundation pledges \$7.8 million to Special Olympics, expanding worldwide efforts to support the inclusion and well-being of people with intellectual disabilities. Building on the organization’s 14-year history of collaboration, this pledge is part of a new multi-year partnership plan that will strengthen ties between Special Olympics and Lions Club International at the country and the community level.

September 2013

The Walt Disney Company, ESPN and Special Olympics announce a two-year global initiative that will leverage the power of sports to promote an environment of social inclusion and acceptance, by uniting people with and without intellectual disabilities through the Special Olympics Unified Sports program. With a multi-million dollar financial and in-kind investment, Disney and ESPN will support Special Olympics’ goal of registering one million Unified Sports participants, including athletes (individuals with intellectual disabilities), teammates (individuals without intellectual disabilities) and coaches, by 2015.

October 2013

Janet Froetscher is named Chief Executive Officer of the global Special Olympics movement. Dr. Timothy P.



Shriver continues as Special Olympics Chairman, working with Froetscher and movement leaders to advance the Special Olympics mission around the world.

February 2014

Her Excellency President Joyce Banda of the Republic of Malawi hosts the first ever African Leaders Forum on Intellectual Disability in partnership with Special Olympics. The effort spearheads collaboration of African Heads of States to develop a more inclusive Africa.