

Unified Sports® at the Collegiate Level

Special Olympics Unified Sports® is an inclusive sports program that combines Special Olympics athletes (individuals with intellectual disabilities) and Unified Sports® partners (college students without intellectual disabilities) on teams for training and competition.

There are three Unified Sports models: Competitive Unified Sports, Unified Sports Player Development and Unified Sports Recreation. Each of these models can be incorporated into a SO College chapter to fulfill the inclusive sports component.

UNIFIED SPORTS COMPETITIVE

The Unified Sports Competitive model combines Special Olympics athletes and Unified Sports partners as teammates on sport teams for training and competition. These athletes and partners must be of similar ability level and the same relative age. Two things differentiate the Unified Sports Competitive model from the other two models:

- All athletes and partners on a Unified Sports competitive team must attain the necessary sport-specific skills and tactics to compete without modification of the current Special Olympics Official Sports Rules
- Teams that participate in this model may be eligible for advancement to Regional and State Games to compete against other Unified Competitive teams

Did you know: You can find more information regarding age and ability matching on the Unified Sports resource website. Check out the resource section below for the link.

UNIFIED SPORTS PLAYER DEVELOPMENT

The Unified Sports Player Development model combines approximately equal numbers of Special Olympics athletes and partners as teammates on sports teams for training and competition. Two things differentiate the Unified Sports Player Development model from the other two models:

- Teammates are not required to be of similar abilities. Teammates of higher abilities serve as mentors to assist teammates of lower abilities in developing sport-specific skills and tactics
- Rules modifications may be employed to prevent higher ability team members from dominating

To successfully participate in a cooperative team environment, athletes and partners should be of similar age to create an atmosphere of peer to peer friendships and social inclusion. Because of different abilities, rules modifications are necessary and designed to ensure meaningful involvement of all teammates and define mentorship roles for higher ability players so they do not dominate play.

UNIFIED SPORTS RECREATION

Unified Sports Recreation consists of inclusive recreational sports opportunities for Special Olympics athletes and Unified partners. This model differentiates from the other two models by:

- Does not follow any prescribed training, competition and/or team composition requirements established by Special Olympics. These recreational opportunities may take place in partnership with schools, sport clubs, the community and other private or public organizations as introductory one-day events, exhibitions or demonstrations (including Unified Sports Experiences) or ongoing activities such as intramurals.
- Is not offered as an official competition at state, national and world games, but is an approved exhibition or demonstration at Special Olympics events.

Did you know: Unified Sports Experiences are a great way to get your campus involved with Unified Sports, and it falls under the Recreation model. Check out the resource section for more information and ideas.

COMPARISON CHART

Competitive	Player Development	Recreation
Inclusive sports program	Inclusive sports program	Inclusive sports program
Approximately equal number of athletes and partners train and compete	Approximately equal number of athletes and partners train and compete	Team should be at least 25% athletes or partners
Similar ability and age of athletes and partners	Similar age of athletes and partners	Does not require athletes and partners to be of similar age or ability
Training and competition scheduled for a season or semester	Training and competition scheduled for a season or semester	Preferably, participation is regularly scheduled. One-time demonstration, fundraising and featured events applied as a catalyst for ongoing activity
Differentiation: 1) Have attained sufficient & necessary sport-specific skills and tactics 2) No modifications of Official Special Olympics Sports Rules 3) Eligible to advance to higher levels of play beyond the Program level (such as Regional and World Games)	Differentiation: 1) Not required to be of similar ability; teammates of higher ability serve as mentors to assist players of lower abilities 2) Rules modifications define players' roles, ensure meaningful involvement and prevent player dominance 3) No advancement beyond the State level competitions	Differentiation: 1) Does not follow any prescribed training, competition and/or team composition requirements established by Special Olympics 2) No advancement beyond the local level

SO College Examples of Unified Sports

Unified Sports Competitive:

College 1: Students contacted their local Special Olympics representative and expressed their interest in starting a competitive Unified Sports team. The representative helped them recruit athletes of the same age and ability level as the interested students on campus. The team then set up a weekly practice throughout the semester. At the end of the season, the SO College chapter hosted a tournament against other regional SO College chapters, who also have a Unified Sports Competitive team.

College 2: Students reached out to the state Special Olympics Program and expressed their interest in starting a competitive team. They then recruited athletes from the local area that were of the same age and ability level as the students. The students then held weekly practices and participated in bi-monthly local and regional Unified Sports tournaments. At the end of the season the team competed in the State Games against other competitive teams of similar age and ability level.

Unified Sports Player Development:

College 3: This college did not have students on campus who had intellectual disabilities, so the SO College members reached out to their local Special Olympics representative to recruit athletes from the local area. Through this recruitment process they received interest from Special Olympics athletes of all different ability levels, and because of this they decided to follow the Player Development model. This allowed for the higher ability teammates to take a mentoring role by encouraging the skill development of the lower ability teammates. At the end of the semester and practice season, they hosted a tournament against other SO College chapters in the region that also used the Player Development model.

College 4: This college was in a very remote part of the state, and was unable to compete against other SO College chapters in the region and relied solely on practicing and skill building within their Unified Sports team. After many weeks of skill building, the season commenced with a scrimmage between two teams from the same SO College chapter.

Unified Sports Recreation:

College 5: Students hosted a one-day Special Olympics Unified Sports Exhibition, where they invited local high school and middle school students (both with and without intellectual disability) to campus to participate in fun activities and skill building clinics led by the college students. The event was a great way to introduce the students and community to Unified Sports and eventually build a base of students and future athletes who are interested in Unified Sports.

College 6: This SO College chapter hosted a one-day bocce tournament where they invited students from campus to participate and volunteer. The students did not hold any practices before the events and simply invited local Special Olympics athletes to join them for the day. This chapter chose this option because they were not able to get enough students or athletes to commit to a full practice schedule. This can be a good starting point for getting students and local athletes involved with Unified Sports on your campus.

Determining which Unified Sports Model to Use

Once you have decided that you want to participate in Unified Sports, this list will give you a step-by-step process to successfully determine which model will work best for the students and Special Olympics athletes.

1. Determine the amount of time and energy you and the SO College chapter are willing to commit to Unified Sports.
 - a. If the students are only willing to commit to a one-day event, please view the “Unified Sports Recreation” section below to learn more about hosting such an event.
 - b. If the students are willing to commit to multiple weeks of practices and tournaments, continue reading to learn more about determining if a Competitive or Player Development team will work best for your campus.
2. Contact your state-level Special Olympics office (this is often the Project UNIFY staff person) and express your interest in starting a Unified Sports team.
 - a. Learn about your state Special Olympics Program’s rules and regulations in regards to starting a Unified Sports team. Determine rules and eligibility to compete in regional or State level games as a Unified Sports team. Discover which sports are offered for college-level Unified Sports teams in your state. Explain that you have yet to determine what model you will follow, but you want to gain a better understanding of what tournaments are available for each model.
 - b. Recruit Unified Sports partners from the University student population. Remember, if you are thinking of conducting a Unified Sports Competitive team, the abilities of all teammates must be closely matched. Additionally, it is critical to recruit partners who will be fully committed to the program- their teammates will be counting on them!
 - c. Have all Unified Sports partners fill out the medical/participant forms required by Special Olympics and the University, and complete any required training, as designated by the state.
 - d. Receive contact information for your local or regional Special Olympics coordinator.
3. Contact your local or regional Program coordinator.
 - a. Identify Special Olympics athletes that would like to join the Unified Sports team at your college. Make sure that they have all required medical/participation forms completed.
 - b. Express that you have yet to determine whether the team will be competitive or Player Development, but you want their advice on the overall skill level of the local Special Olympics athletes. They will be able to guide you on determining which model is best suited.
 - c. Ask them if you can recruit new athletes from the local area. This will allow more individuals the opportunity to participate in Special Olympics.
4. If the coordinator agrees to allow you to recruit new athletes, reach out to local high schools, organizations, and Disability Service Providers to recruit more athletes for your Unified Sports Team.
 - a. Make sure you express the importance of inclusion within the community and how Unified Sports can be a benefit for everyone involved. Visit the resource page below for a list of benefits.

- b. Have all new athletes complete Special Olympics participation and medical forms that are required by your state Program. Ensure athletes understand they will become Special Olympics athletes, once the forms are returned.
- c. Evaluate the skill level of the new athletes and partners to determine which Unified Sports model is best suited. (This evaluation can be found at the Unified Sports resource page under “Assessing Players and Forming Unified teams”.)
- d. If you have a wide-range of skill sets, follow a Player Development model.
- e. If partners and athletes are of similar skill level, follow a Competitive model.
- f. Continue reading below for more information on starting a team for each model.

Starting a Unified Sports Competitive Team

Once your SO College chapter has chosen the Unified Sports Competitive model, this guide will give you a step-by-step process to successfully implement this model of Unified Sports on your campus.

1. If you have chosen a competitive team, but you still have athletes and partners who do not meet the skill level required for your competitive team, there are a few other options available to include everyone:
 - a. Establish a smaller player development team that these individuals can join.
 - b. Choose a sport that does not require ability matching such as bowling, bocce or tennis.
 - c. Find a different role for these individuals, such as becoming an assistant coach or team assistant.
 - d. Lower ability teammates may train in the “individual skills” of a sport. Individual skills are offered for many Special Olympics sports as listed in the Sports Rules.
2. Contact your school to secure practice space for your team.
 - a. Determine the required documents or legal issues surrounding the use of facilities on campus.
 - b. Ask if you can promote your new team on campus using flyers, banners, school newspaper, or email.
 - c. Invite all school officials/administration to come out to a practice to gain a better understanding of your team.
3. Invite all students, athletes and family members to an introductory meeting.
 - a. Set up a practice time that is convenient for all students and athletes. Discuss any tournaments or games your team will participate in throughout the season. There must be 8 consecutive weeks of training and practice, which also includes at least one local, regional, or SO College tournament.
 - b. Explain the rules and the way a Unified Sports Competitive team will operate, stressing that the role of Unified Partners is to be an equal teammate, not a mentor or helper. (The guidelines can be found in the resource page below)
 - c. Plan other events that can help foster friendships between athletes and partners.
 - a. Team dinners after practice or tournaments
 - b. Movie night once a month
 - c. Day trips to museums or local amusement parks
4. Once the season is over, stay in contact with the students and athletes.
 - a. Plan additional sports or social events throughout the school year and invite everyone who was involved with the Unified Sports team to participate.
 - b. Use the summer to start planning for the next season by reaching out to all past students and athletes to get them involved again.

Starting a Unified Sports Player Development Team

Once your SO College chapter has chosen the Unified Sports Player Development model this guide will give you a step-by-step process to successfully implement this model of Unified Sports on your campus.

1. Contact your school to secure practice space for your team.
 - a. Determine the required documents or legal issues surrounding the use of facilities on campus.
 - b. Ask if you can promote your new team on campus using flyers, banners, school newspaper, or email.
 - c. Invite all school officials to come out to a practice to gain a better understanding of your team. Incredible
2. Invite all students, athletes and family members to an introductory meeting.
 - a. Set up a practice time that is convenient for all students and athletes. Discuss any tournaments or games your team will participate in throughout the season. If you are competing in a tournament, there must be 8 consecutive weeks of training and practice before the competition.
 - b. Most Player Development teams are able to compete in local and state games, but you must inquire from the state Special Olympics office about the specific rule changes and modifications that will be in place at the tournament.
 - c. Explain the rules and the way a Unified Sports Player Development team will operate, this includes the importance of not having a student/partner dominated game. (The rules can be found in the resource page below)
 - d. Plan other events that can help foster friendships between the athletes and partners.
 - i. Team dinners after practice or tournaments
 - ii. Movie night once a month
 - iii. Day trips to museums or local amusement parks
3. During practice set up a system in which a partner and athlete work closely together to gain skill and develop a strong friendship.
 - a. Set up skill building stations where the mentor can help the mentee learn new techniques for the upcoming game or tournament.
 - b. Have a scrimmage to give everyone the experience of how a real game will feel.
4. Once the season is over, stay in contact with the students and athletes.
 - a. Plan events throughout the school year and invite everyone who was involved with the Unified Sports team to participate.
 - b. Use the summer to start planning for the next season, by reaching out to all past students and athletes to get them involved again.



Unified Sports Recreation

Once your SO College chapter has chosen Unified Sports Recreation, this guide will give you a step-by-step process on how to successfully implement this model of Unified Sports into your chapter..

1. Contact your state Special Olympics Program and express your interest in hosting a Unified Sports Recreation event/program on campus. Unified Sports Recreation can be offered as a one-day event (which acts as a catalyst for more events), series of events, or a “pick-up” type game that does not yet have the structure of Unified Sports Competitive or Player Development models.
 - a. Determine what type of event/program would be most beneficial for the college students and athletes. Here are a few options to consider:
 - i. A Special Olympics Unified Sports Exhibition day or a Unified Scrimmage against a Club sports team on campus.
 1. The Special Olympics Unified Sports Exhibition event could be held as a skill building clinic or an introduction to Special Olympics for children and their families.
 2. Reach out to a club or intramural sports team on campus to see if they would be interested in teaming up with Special Olympics athletes and other students to have a one-day inclusive scrimmage.
 - ii. Plan and execute a one-day TRAIN event to test the skills of local Special Olympics athletes.
 1. TRAIN (Testing Recreational Activities and Improving Nutrition) is an assessment program developed to test Special Olympics athletes’ sports skills in specific areas. The purpose of the assessment is to provide each athlete the knowledge of his or her own strengths in specific skill areas, certain skill areas that could be improved, and recognition of other Special Olympic sports that he or she may excel in based on the athlete’s strengths. Learn more about TRAIN in the resource section below.
 2. Use the results found from TRAIN to put together a Unified Sports Competitive or Player Development team based upon the skills of the athletes.
 - iii. Hold a “come and try” or “open-gym” type opportunity for local Special Olympics athletes and college students to play a sport together.
 - b. Inquire about necessary forms and protocol that must be followed before you start your event.
2. Contact your regional or local Special Olympics coordinator and express your interest in conducting a Unified Sports recreation event.
 - a. If you would like to host an event with local students, inquire about possible schools and students in the area that would be interested in attending the event.
 - b. Request any resources that may be helpful for someone hosting a one-day event or ideas on how to use the one-day event as a catalyst for more involvement on campus.
 - c. Invite all local Special Olympics staff to your event to gain their feedback and hear about ways in which you can become more involved in Unified Sports.
3. Contact your school.
 - a. Inquire about locations on campus that will be available to host an event, such as the one you are planning.

- b. Fill out all necessary forms and documents that are required to host an event on campus.
 - c. If you want to host a scrimmage, contact a club or intramural sports team to see if they are interested in participating in your one-day event.
 4. Reach out to all interested students and athletes.
 - a. Have members of the SO College chapter contact their friends and classmates to build interest in the event. Invite these students to volunteer or become Fans in the Stand during the event.
 - b. Elect members of the SO College chapter to reach out to local community members and leaders to invite them to the event.
 - c. Set up a core group of students who will be in charge of planning, executing, and evaluating the event.
 - i. Work with your local Special Olympics Coordinator to help identify Special Olympics athletes who would benefit from serving on the planning committee as well. They will be able to give a great athlete perspective!
 - d. Invite your school newspaper or media group to cover the event.
 5. After the event, poll the students and athletes to determine their interest in participating in another Unified Sports event or team.
 - a. Host another event next semester or plan for a semester long Unified Sports team.
 - b. Stay in contact with all students and athletes, for when you do host another event.
 - c. Build relationships with Special Olympics staff and college officials to publicize the event before and after.



Hosting a Unified Sports Tournament

Once your SO College chapter has agreed on either the Competitive or Player Development Unified Sports model, you may consider hosting a regional or state SO College Unified Sports tournament. Below is a step-by-step guide on how this can be accomplished.

1. Contact your state Special Olympics staff to express your interest in hosting a tournament.
 - a. Ask them about any forms you need to complete to host a tournament on campus.
 - i. All your athletes and partners should have the medical/consent forms filled out by this point because you have been participating in Unified Sports throughout the semester/year.
 - b. Continue to stay in constant communication with the state staff throughout the planning, execution, and evaluation process of the tournament.
2. Contact other SO College chapters in the state or region.
 - a. Contact your State Special Olympics staff to invite other SO College chapters from within your state.
 - b. Email socollege@specialolympics.org to find SO College chapters outside of your state.
 - c. Contact these SO College chapters to make sure they have the same Unified Sports model as you and are willing to participate in a tournament. Also clarify the rules and regulations that will be followed for this tournament.
 - d. Set up a schedule for communication (weekly phone calls, email updates, etc.) with all schools that are involved in the tournament to discuss problems, concerns, and questions.
3. If you are inviting SO College chapters from outside your state, make contact with state-level Special Olympics liaisons and students at the school.
 - a. You can be placed in contact with them by contacting your state Program and asking for the connection to be made, or by emailing socollege@specialolympics.org to ask for the state contact.
 - b. Work with both Special Olympics states liaisons (from your state and the other state) to discover the procedures/policies in bringing a SO College chapter over state-lines.
 - c. Make sure that the other SO College chapter is in contact with their state Program and have completed all the needed medical/consent forms.
4. Contact your school offices regarding the event.
 - a. Complete all paper work and secure a location for the tournament.
 - b. Invite key school staff and faculty to the event to increase awareness of your SO College chapter.
 - c. Invite students to be Fans in the Stands and cheer the teams on throughout the tournament.
5. Once you are ready to start planning the event, create student leadership positions.
 - a. Determine a budget for the tournament, taking into account transportation, food, awards, etc.
 - b. Develop a schedule of play and distribute it to all schools to gain feedback.
 - c. Develop a planning committee and designate specific roles:
 - i. Budget Manager- This person can be in charge of creating a budget and working with all student leaders to make sure everyone abides by the set budget. This position can be held by a business major who can gain valuable experience from this role.
 - ii. External Communication- This person can be in charge of communicating with the state Special Olympics office, other schools involved, and local

media through press releases and social media. This position can be filled by a communications major who can gain valuable experience from this role.

- iii. Volunteer Recruiter- This person can be in charge of recruiting students and local community members to participate in different positions; such as referees, on-site first aid, and security for the tournament. This position can be filled by a variety of majors that require a strong interpersonal skill set.
- iv. Sports Organizer- This person can be in charge of all the sports rules for the tournament and organization of all the sports related aspects to ensure a quality event. This position can be filled by a sports management major who will be able to learn valuable skills through this role.



The Seven Criteria Unified Sports Success

Below is a valuable list for creating a sustainable and successful Unified Sports team. It is important to incorporate all seven of these criteria to ensure a positive experience for all participants.

1) Principle of Meaningful Involvement – This is the most critical determinant of success and the coach and all of the players must follow it. *Fundamentally, the principle of meaningful involvement ensures that every player is given an opportunity to contribute to the success of his or her team through their unique skills and qualities.* This means that every teammate: (a) demonstrates sufficient sport-specific skills and game understanding; (b) plays a valued role on the team that emphasizes his or her personal talents; and (c) has an opportunity to play without a heightened risk of injury.

2) Selection of appropriate sport – A variety of factors influence the determination of which sport is chosen for Unified Sports training and competition. Some of these factors include athlete and partner interest, age and ability levels of potential athletes and partners, available facilities and equipment, availability of qualified coaches, finances and opportunities for competition.

3) Qualified coaches lead the program – Unified Sports teams should be organized under the guidance of a trained coach who understands and adopts the principles of Special Olympics and Unified Sports, and has knowledge of the rules, techniques, strategies and training regimens of the selected sport.

4) Selection of appropriate teammates – It is fundamental to the Special Olympics experience that each participant on a team has the ability and opportunity to contribute to the team's success and embraces the principle of meaningful involvement. Team members should have the necessary skills to participate on a Unified Sports team without causing undue risk of injury to themselves or others. Additionally, team members should be matched by age and ability as specifically defined by the sport. All players on a Unified Sports team make the commitment to attend every practice, support each other as equal teammates, and demonstrate respect and sportsmanship.

5) Quality training and frequent competition leads to a culminating event – Unified Sports teams shall have a minimum of ten weeks of training and competition (practices, scrimmages and league competition) before the culminating championship event.

6) Unified Sports rules are followed – All Unified Sports competitions should be conducted according to Official Special Olympics Sports Rules, including placement of Unified Sports teams in appropriate age and ability divisions.

7) Commitment of support – Four levels of support are critical to start and sustain the Unified Sports program.

a. The Special Olympics Program (state) provides funding, training of coaches and competition management and a culminating event.

b. The Local Special Olympics Program (school or community) is responsible for training athletes and partners, conducting local competition and securing facilities, equipment and uniforms.

c. *Coaches* are responsible for gaining knowledge, training and coaching athletes and partners and ensuring that they have frequent opportunities to compete.

d. Lastly, the spectator provides acknowledgement, engagement and acceptance – having cheering fans in the stands can be crucial to the motivation of a team, especially a Unified Sports team.

Resources

Below are resources that may be valuable when establishing a Unified Sports team on campus.

Unified Sports Resource Page: There are numerous resources available for all models of Unified Sports on the Unified Sports Resource website.

http://resources.specialolympics.org/Topics/Unified_Sports/Unified_Sports_Resources.aspx

Online Unified Sports Course: This course is offered at no cost for all individuals who want to start a Unified Sports Program. Additionally, the NFHS Learn website offers sport specific resources.

<http://www.nfhslern.com/electiveDetail.aspx?courseID=36000>

Official Unified Sports Rules: Within each one of the individual sports' rule book, there is a specific section for Unified Sports. You can find these links through the link below.

http://www.specialolympics.org/Sections/Sports-and-Games/Sports_and_Games.aspx

Unified Sports Experience: Gain a better idea of what Unified Sports Experience is and how it could work on campus. This link can be found on the Unified Sports Resource page under "Unified Sports Experience"

<http://tinyurl.com/mtv69d2>

Benefits of Unified Sports: There has been much research done on the overall impact of Unified Sports:

1. Research studies by Siperstein (2010) and Özer (2011) have confirmed the positive social impact of Unified Sports on individuals with and without intellectual disabilities as well as their communities. Unified Sports is effective in increasing the positive behaviors of individuals with intellectual disabilities and improving attitudes of individuals without disabilities toward participants with disabilities. Unified Sports helps increase the skills necessary for individuals with intellectual disabilities to be accepted and fulfilled socially (developing meaningful relationships, being accepted and respected and being better prepared for community living).
2. Visit the Unified Sports Resource page for more information on research studies

TRAIN: TRAIN is a program developed by Special Olympics with the purpose of tracking, improving and assisting athletes in regards to overall health and quality of life.

There is a specific section called TRAIN @ College within the TRAIN resource page specifically for hosting a TRAIN event on campus. Use this resource to gain valuable knowledge on how a TRAIN event could function on campus.

<http://resources.specialolympics.org/TRAIN-Downloads2.aspx>