



Special Olympics Handbook

# UNIFIED SPORTS



Special Olympics

UNIFIED SPORTS®

**S**pecial Olympics Unified Sports® brings together athletes with and without intellectual disabilities to train and compete on the same team. Throughout the year, in a variety of sports ranging from basketball to golf to figure skating, Unified Sports athletes improve their physical fitness, sharpen their skills, challenge the competition and have fun, too.

The concept of combining athletes with intellectual disabilities and those without (called partners) was first introduced in the United States in the mid-1980s to provide another level of challenge for higher ability athletes and to promote equality and inclusion. Today, the initiative includes virtually all Special Olympics sports, and Unified Sports competitions are an important part of Special Olympics World Games, as well as local, state and national Games.

Unified Sports enables athletes to:

- learn new sports;
- develop higher-level sports skills;
- have new competition experiences;
- experience meaningful inclusion as each athlete is ensured of playing a valued role on the team;
- socialize with peers and form friendships (the program provides a forum for positive social interaction between teammates and often leads to long-lasting friendships); and
- participate in their communities and have choices outside of Special Olympics (Unified Sports programs often are initiated by community partners, including parks and recreation departments, schools, Boys and Girls Clubs of America and community sports organizations. These partnerships help further include athletes in their community).

### The Special Olympics Unified Sports Handbook

This handbook includes all the information coaches need to start and maintain a successful Unified Sports program. For more information, contact the Special Olympics Sports & Competition Department at +1 (202) 628-3630.



## Acknowledgements

---

Special Olympics is grateful for the invaluable contributions of the U.S. Leadership Council's Unified Sports Committee:

Cary Anson  
Andrew Austin  
Mike Bovino  
Jody Brylinsky  
David Bueche  
Gary Cimaglia  
Ashley Collier  
Priscilla Dowse  
Mike Furnish  
Mark Hanken  
Susan Krumm  
Annette Lynch  
Mary Otten  
Chuck Russell  
Jack Salazar  
David Schultheis  
Roger Slingerman  
Mike Townsley  
Jim Wiseman

Greg Epperson, Robyn Markey and  
Special Olympics North America Staff

Dave Lenox and Special Olympics Sports Staff

Special Olympics Publications Department

AND

The staff, volunteers, coaches, athletes and partners who work so hard to make this program successful around the world

# Table of Contents

A. Introduction to Special Olympics Unified Sports . . . . .	1	D. Exercises and Checklists . . . . .	4
Special Olympics . . . . .	1.1	In this section you will find tools for recruiting Unified Sports partners and coaches as well as determining whether or not your Unified Sports team meets the guidelines and standards set by Special Olympics, Inc. for Unified Sports competition. These are meant to be copied and shared with potential coaches, athletes and family members as you navigate the Unified Sports experience. You will utilize several of these forms in the process of Unified Sports orientation and training. As always, we encourage your comments and suggestions on these or other forms that might be helpful.	
Definition of Unified Sports . . . . .	1.2	Coach Development Exercise . . . . .	4.1
Partner Eligibility . . . . .	1.3	Team Development Exercise . . . . .	4.2
Unified Sports Rules . . . . .	1.4	Situations - <i>What if This Happened to You?</i> . . . . .	4.3
History of Unified Sports . . . . .	1.5	Unified Sports Team Checklist . . . . .	4.4
Benefits of Unified Sports . . . . .	1.6	Self-Evaluation Checklist . . . . .	4.5
Research . . . . .	1.7	Quick Reference Guide . . . . .	4.6
B. The Special Olympics Unified Sports Team . . . . .	2		
Criteria for Success . . . . .	2.1	 Denotes key information	
Selection of a Sport . . . . .	2.2		
Age and Ability Considerations . . . . .	2.3		
Roster Composition in Team Sports . . . . .	2.4		
The Unified Sports Coach . . . . .	2.5		
Selection of Team Members . . . . .	2.6		
Where to Recruit Teammates . . . . .	2.7		
Where to Start? . . . . .	2.8		
Team Member Guidelines . . . . .	2.9		
Sportsmanship . . . . .	2.10		
C. Training and Competition . . . . .	3		
Training . . . . .	3.1		
Local Competition . . . . .	3.2		
Program Competition . . . . .	3.3		
Guidelines for a Successful Unified Sports Competition . . . . .	3.4		



## Section A

# Introduction to Special Olympics Unified Sports

### 1.1 Special Olympics

**Mission:** To provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in a sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community.

**History:** The first International Special Olympics Games organized by Eunice Kennedy Shriver and the Chicago Park District, were held at Soldier Field (Chicago, Illinois, USA) in 1968.

**Eligibility:** Persons are eligible for Special Olympics provided that they are 8 years of age or older; and have been identified by an agency or professional as having an intellectual disability; or have closely related developmental disabilities such as functional limitations, both in general learning and in adaptive skills such as recreation, work, independent living, self-direction or self-care.

**Note:** People with functional limitations based solely on a physical, behavioral, emotional, specific learning disability or sensory disability are not eligible. Special Olympics does not determine whether or not a person has an intellectual disability, but determines eligibility based on the identification made by an agency or a professional.

**Participation:** According to the 2002 Special Olympics Athlete Participation Report, more than 1.2 million children and adults train and compete in Special Olympics Programs around the world.

**Programs:** Special Olympics provides a variety of competition opportunities for athletes of all abilities by offering official events of various degrees of difficulty and challenge. The Motor Activities Training Program (MATP) provides participation for individuals with significant disabilities requiring the greatest assistance and support. In many sports, low-ability athletes can participate in modified events such as the 25m Assisted Walk (athletics) or the 15m Flotation Race (aquatics). There are also events for athletes who use wheelchairs. In team sports, lower-ability athletes can participate in Individual Skills Competitions such as football (soccer) Dribbling, Shooting, and a Run-and-Kick event.

Most Special Olympics events have few differences from the sport played by individuals without disabilities. Higher-ability athletes are now participating in events such as the marathon, or in Unified Sports events alongside athletes without disabilities. Play Activities is a new program that provides non-competitive sports activities for 6 and 7 year olds that prepares them for full participation in Special Olympics at age 8.

Special Olympics athletes train year-round to compete in a variety of local, area, state/provincial and world competitions. Every two years teams from around the world compete in the Special Olympics World Games. The World Games alternate between winter and summer sports.



### 1.2 Definition of Special Olympics Unified Sports



Special Olympics Unified Sports is a program that combines approximately equal numbers of Special Olympics athletes and athletes without intellectual disabilities (partners) on sports teams for training and competition.

Age and ability matching of athletes and partners is specifically defined on a sport-by-sport basis.

*For purposes of simplicity, throughout this handbook Unified Sports team members with intellectual disabilities are referred to as “athletes” and teammates without disabilities are referred to as “partners.”*

### 1.3 Partner Eligibility

Though the above definition allows for partners with disabilities other than intellectual disabilities, Unified Sports was developed to provide Special Olympics athletes with the choice of a sports program that brings about meaningful inclusion with their non-disabled peers. According to the Arc of the United States (a national organization of and for people with intellectual disabilities and related developmental disabilities and their families):

“All our constituents have the right to participate fully in their diverse communities. Needed supports should be available and affordable so that each individual with disabilities can live, learn, work and play with others who do not have disabilities.”

(The Arc Position Statement on Inclusion, 2002)



The desired objectives of a Unified Sports experience are best fulfilled when partners on a team are individuals without disabilities. Even though an individual with a disability may make an appropriate partner, “Special Olympics Unified Sports teams should never be composed solely of people with disabilities.” (Special Olympics Chairman and CEO Timothy Shriver, following the Unified Sports Summit Conference in Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1998.)

### 1.4 Rules

As is the case throughout Special Olympics, national governing body rules are enforced unless they are in conflict with Special Olympics modifications. Please check the Official Special Olympics Sports Rules for the most up-to-date information.

Unified Sports rules require:

- 1) **A roster containing proportionate numbers of athletes and partners.** Although the exact distribution of roster spots is not specified, it is generally accepted that a basketball roster containing eight athletes and two partners does not meet the goals of the program.
- 2) **A line-up during the competition in which half of the participants are athletes and half of the participants are partners.** Teams that have an odd number of players (e.g., 5-a-side soccer) have one more athlete than partner in the game at all times.

- 3) **Teams are divisioned for competition based primarily on ability.** In team sports, division assignment is based on the best players on the roster, not the average ability of all players.
- 4) **All individuals on the team receive Special Olympics awards.** The official supplier of Special Olympics awards has medals and ribbons specifically for Unified Sports. Each program has the option of using these awards or “regular” Special Olympics awards.
- 5) **An adult, non-playing coach for team sports.** Player-coaches are not allowed in team sports.

### 1.5 History of Special Olympics Unified Sports

#### 1983: Massachusetts “Integrated” Softball Program

*The concept of Unified Sports, originally called “integrated sports,” was brought to the attention of Special Olympics Founder Eunice Kennedy Shriver at the 1983 Special Olympics National Conference in Park City, Utah.*

*The idea was generated through Special Olympics Massachusetts due to changes occurring in the field of intellectual disabilities. Most of the agency directors and leadership of that period were interested in programs that put people with intellectual disabilities together with people without disabilities. Social integration was the buzzword of that time period. It was in this climate that Special Olympics Massachusetts created an integrated softball tournament. As the Program Director, I went to see Mrs. Shriver at her house to tell her about the tournament.*

*My points of emphasis were camaraderie between people with and without disabilities, skill development, choice and changing with the times. Luckily for Special Olympics, she approved further research. The name was changed from “Integrated Sports” to “Unified Sports” and in 1989 she announced to the world the endorsement of this new program.*

— Beau Doherty

#### 1988: Pilot Projects funded by Special Olympics grants

Special Olympics headquarters provides start-up grants to several states to organize local Unified Sports leagues in softball, volleyball, basketball, and soccer.

#### 1989: Worldwide implementation in team sports

Special Olympics announces the adoption of Unified Sports as an official Special Olympics program in team sports during its conference in Charleston, South Carolina.

**1991: Unified Sports competition at Special Olympics World Summer Games**

The first international competition in Unified Sports is held in softball, volleyball, football (soccer) and bowling during the World Games in Minneapolis/St. Paul.

**1996: Official Special Olympics Sports Rules include Unified Sports rules for all sports**

The Special Olympics Sports Rules Committee adopts Unified Sports rules in each official sport.

## 1.6 Benefits of Special Olympics Unified Sports

Special Olympics Unified Sports is an additional means of carrying out and fulfilling the mission of Special Olympics. Teams are constructed in such a way as to provide training and competition opportunities that meaningfully challenge and involve all athletes. These opportunities often lead to improved sports skills, higher self-esteem, equal status among peers and new friendships.



**Sport-Specific Skill Development** - Under the direction of qualified coaches, Unified Sports participants have the opportunity to develop and improve sport-specific skills.

**Competition Experience** - Athletes who participate in Unified Sports experience new physical and mental challenges and become better prepared to compete on a school or community sports team beyond Special Olympics.

**Meaningful Inclusion** - Unified Sports rules and guidelines on age and ability grouping, as specifically defined on a sport-by-sport basis, ensure that all team members play an important, meaningful and valued role on the team.

**Community-Based Participation** - Unified Sports programs receive valuable assistance from parks and recreation departments, schools, youth and adult organizations, and many other community sports organizations. These partnerships offer people with intellectual disabilities another opportunity to be a part of community life.

**Transition and Choice** - Through Unified Sports, Special Olympics athletes are given opportunities to join in the mainstream of sports and community activities. Unified Sports programs help schools meet transition and inclusion mandates and provide alternative choices for athletes currently registered for Special Olympics as well as new athletes.

**Public Education** - Unified Sports increases public awareness of the spirit, skills and abilities of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

**Family Involvement** - Siblings of Special Olympics athletes are provided a valuable opportunity to participate as partners or coaches. Caution should be used in selecting parents to participate as partners on a Unified Sports team. In some sports (e.g., golf, tennis, bowling), being on a team with a parent is quite normal and appropriate. In many other sports, however, parents on a team might be inappropriate by both age matching and teammate equality guidelines.

**Personal Development** - Team members may improve their self-esteem, develop friendships and gain an understanding of each other's capabilities through a spirit of equality and team unity.

*“The important thing about my Unified Sports team is that it allows my Special Olympics athletes to be less isolated, more a part of the community.”*

*-Special Olympics Unified Sports Coach*

## 1.7 Research

With financial support from Special Olympics and the Christmas Records Grant Program Fund, two separate research projects were initiated to better understand the success, effectiveness and potential barriers in Special Olympics Unified Sports. The Western Michigan University Special Olympics Unified Sports Project (1996-2000) was a four-year longitudinal study that focused on the operation of Unified Sports leagues housed within a university service learning structure. Analysis of partner attitude, coach behavior and athlete participant success was conducted.

The Center for Social Development and Education at the University of Massachusetts – Boston and the Department of Special Education at the University of Utah conducted a joint project entitled “National Evaluation of the Special Olympics Unified Sports Program” (2000-2001). The purpose of the national evaluation was to analyze the perceptions of key stakeholders (state directors, athletes, family members, partners and coaches) regarding their commitment to the concept of Unified Sports, and their overall satisfaction with the Unified Sports Program.

### Summary Conclusions of Both Research Projects

First and foremost, it can be unequivocally stated that Unified Sports has a positive impact on all participants. Athletes and partners in a Unified Sports program are able to significantly improve their sports skills when the program structure and participant matching provide meaningful participation and instruction.

- 1) Athletes involved in Unified Sports enjoy the program and are likely to remain involved in the program. The primary reasons for their commitment are factors that contribute to both socialization and personal investment. Sources of sport commitment in Unified Sports athletes are similar to other youth sport athletes, specifically fun, competition and pride in personal performance.
- 2) Unified Sports coaches are perceived to be adequately trained, capable and sincere in assisting both athletes and partners in the stated goals of Unified Sports. Coaching behaviors are most frequently supportive and instructional. Coaching errors are similar to those made by other sport coaches, which include not responding to mistakes or missing the opportunity to reinforce good performance.



---

*“I’ve seen more interaction on the field today between classmates than I’ve seen in my classroom all year.”*

*-Kitzi Chotlos, Special Education Teacher*

---



## Section B

# The Special Olympics Unified Sports Team

- 3) Partners indicate that they gain a better understanding of intellectual disabilities and enjoy participating with their teammates, particularly the athletes with intellectual disabilities, during Unified Sports. Special Olympics requires participant orientation and mandatory coach training to guard against the development of negative attitudes as a byproduct of inexperience, lack of knowledge or program difficulties.
- 4) The growth and success of Unified Sports programs is significantly influenced by the commitment and attitude of the organization's leadership. When staff perceives this program to be a drain on existing resources, a threat to traditional programs and not complementary to the mission, there is a generalized ambivalence toward Unified Sports. On the other hand, when Unified Sports is seen as an important choice capable of reaching new athletes, the program normally flourishes.
- 5) There is considerable variability around key aspects of Unified Sports program implementation at state/provincial and local levels, especially about the definition and role of partners.
- 6) All of the data points to the fact that the concept of "partner" is difficult to implement consistently at the state/provincial and local levels. While the "peer-dynamic" between athlete and partner is considered essential in Unified Sports training materials, the satisfaction level of athletes, partners and family members did not seem to be tied to "who is the partner." As such, these examples point out that the satisfaction of participants at the local level may be more related to the flexibility of the definition of partner than to the strict adherence to eligibility criteria.



### 2.1 Criteria for Success

Special Olympics adopted Unified Sports in 1989 to expand sports opportunities for athletes seeking new challenges while dramatically increasing their inclusion in the community. Extensive field-testing has demonstrated that Unified Sports teams are most likely to accomplish the goals of the program when the following criteria are met:

- 1) **An appropriate sport is selected** - A variety of factors influence the determination of which sport is chosen for Unified Sports training and competition. Some of these factors include availability of qualified coaches, ability levels of potential athletes and partners, finances, facilities and opportunities for competition.
- 2) **Qualified coaches lead the program** - Unified Sports teams should be organized under the guidance of a trained coach who understands the principles of Unified Sports and the rules, techniques, strategies and training regimens of the selected sport.
- 3) **Appropriate teammates are selected** - 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. Team members should have the requisite 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.
- 4) **Quality training leads to competition** - All team members of a Unified Sports team shall have a minimum eight weeks of training (practice, scrimmages and league competition) before the culminating championship event.
- 5) **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.



## 2.2 Selection of a Sport

The first step in the development of a Unified Sports program is the selection of a sport. There are many factors that may influence the decision of which sports to offer in your Unified Sports program. They include:

- athlete interest;
- facilities;
- schedule;
- finances;
- availability of qualified coaches;
- the ability level of potential athletes and partners; and
- opportunities for local, area and state/provincial competition.

It is important to recognize that the selection of a sport has a significant bearing on the types of athletes and partners needed to conduct a successful program.



## 2.3 Age and Ability Considerations

While the best Unified Sports experience is produced when athletes and partners are of similar age and ability, there is some flexibility, depending on the sport chosen. Based on the nature, characteristics and team dynamics, sports have been separated into the following two groups, each with a unique standard for age and ability matching.

Unified Sports teams should be constructed in such a way as to provide training and competition opportunities that meaningfully involve and challenge all participants (athletes and partners). The opportunities often lead to improved sports skills, higher self-esteem, equal status with peers and new friendships.

*Sections 2.4 (Roster Composition) and 2.6 (Selection of Team Members) provide greater detail regarding appropriately matching athletes and partners by age and ability. See page 31 for athlete-partner ratios on field of play.*

*In all cases, refer to the Official Special Olympics Summer and Winter Sports Rules to identify the specific sports where having athletes and partners of similar age and ability is “preferred” and where it is “required.”*

### **Group 1: Basketball, Badminton, Floor Hockey, Football (Soccer), Softball, Table Tennis, Team Handball, Tennis, Volleyball**

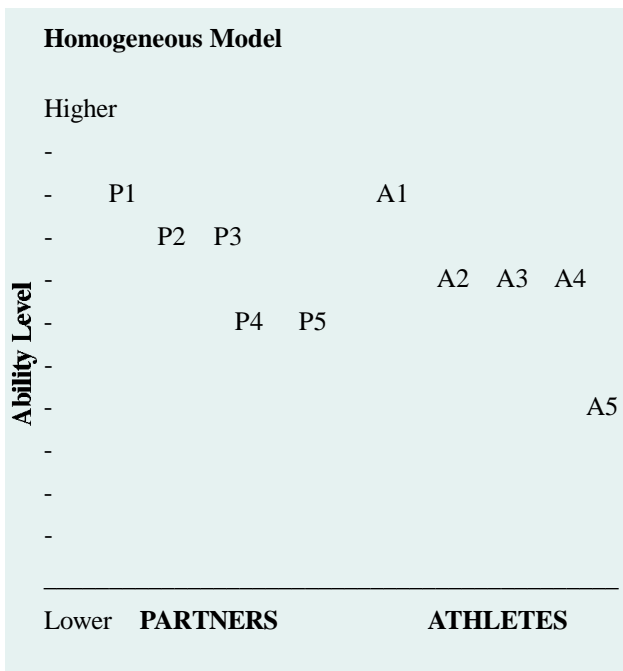
For these sports, selection of athletes and partners of similar age and ability is essential for Unified Sports training and competition in these sports. Though rules modifications have been implemented to minimize differences between athletes and partners, inappropriate competition experiences and a higher risk of injury result from teams where athletes and partners are poorly matched.

### **Group 2: Aquatics, Athletics, Bowling, Bocce, Cross Country Skiing, Cycling, Equestrian, Figure Skating, Golf, Powerlifting, Roller Skating, Sailing, Speed Skating, Snow Shoeing**

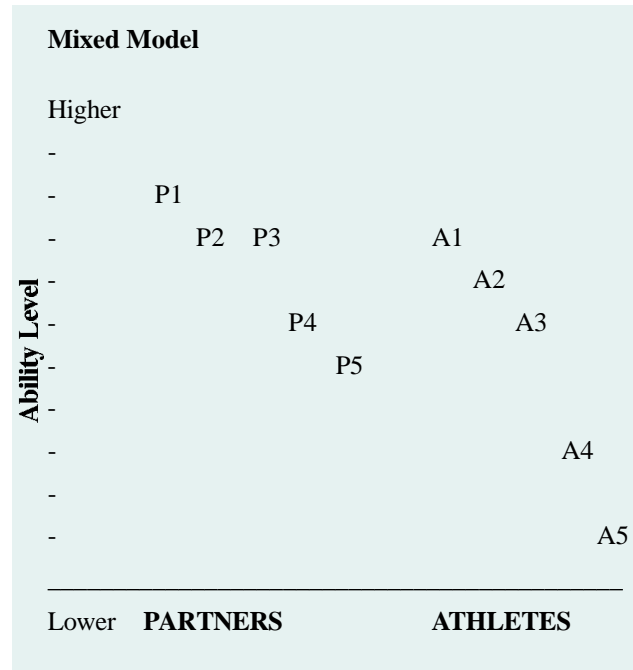
For these sports, selection of athletes and partners of similar age and ability is preferred, but not essential, for Unified Sports training and competition in these sports. Though ability matching is not essential in these sports, it may enhance the quality of training and competition experiences. Due to the nature of the competitive environment in these sports, there is minimal additional risk of injury when athletes and partners are not matched by ability.

### 2.4 Roster Composition in Team Sports

Assembling a team of Special Olympics athletes and partners of similar ability levels is desired in Unified Sports, but not always achieved. Illustrated here are three different models for the composition of a Unified Sports team.



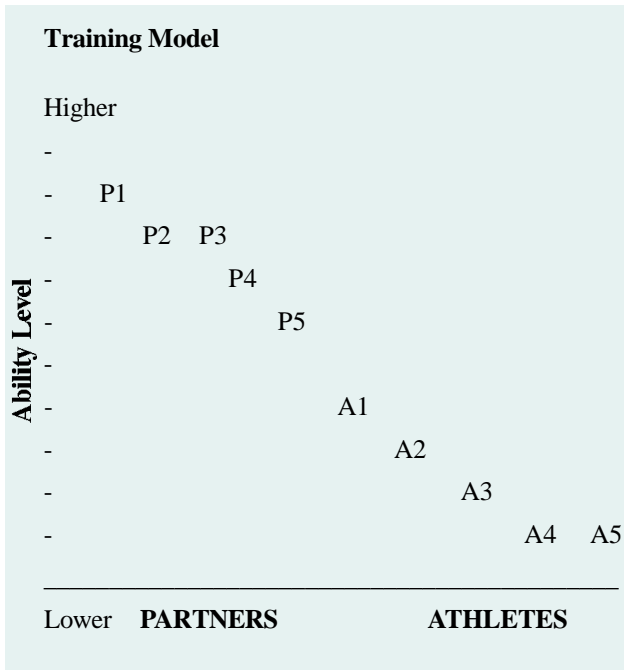
This is the preferred composition for a Unified Sports team. All participants (partners and athletes) have similar or complementary skills. If one were to watch this team compete, it might be difficult to distinguish between partners and Special Olympics athletes.



This is the most common model for a Unified Sports team. A few of the Special Olympics athletes have abilities commensurate with the partners and are capable of contributing to team performance. All teammates with lower ability must be able to participate according to the rules and conditions of competition for that sport. Safety is a consideration for athletes without the requisite skills for participation.

*“The success or failure of a Unified Sports team rests entirely in the hands of the coach. The coach imparts the principles and philosophy, selects the athletes and partners, imparts the skills and tactics necessary for the specific sport and, ultimately, must hold himself or herself responsible to a higher standard than anyone else. A successful Unified Sports coach will do all of these things.”*

*-Jan Sartain, Special Olympics Unified Sports Coach*



This team is not appropriate for Unified Sports competition. All partners have superior ability in comparison to the Special Olympics athletes. They must make significant accommodations to include them in competition. Safety is a consideration for athletes without the requisite skills for participation.

This model can be used to establish a training program that will benefit the Special Olympics athletes by better preparing them for traditional Special Olympics competitions. Official Special Olympics medals and ribbons are not awarded if these "training" teams scrimmage or play modified games. Special Olympics recognizes that programs may need to develop non-competition opportunities for teams that do not accomplish the age and ability matching. These opportunities should be designed to enhance sports skill development and promote future participation in traditional Unified Sports.

## 2.5 The Special Olympics Unified Sports Coach

The most important person to the success of a Unified Sports team is the coach. An effective and successful coach is not simply one who helps a team win. Equally important is his or her contribution to teaching, improving and applying sports skills, building team spirit, exhibiting sportsmanship on and off the field and helping to instill positive values in all members of the team. The coach also plays the critical role of

carefully selecting athletes who are appropriately matched in age and ability as specifically defined by the sport.

### 2.5.1 National Standards for Athletic Coaches

National standards for athletic coaches were developed as a result of a national project involving sport organizations and facilitated by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE). Sport organizations included national governing bodies, youth organizations and coaching education providers. These standards are divided into eight areas and involve what coaches should know and demonstrate:

- 1) **Philosophy and Ethics** - demonstrate and advocate appropriate sportsmanship and mission of Special Olympics
- 2) **Growth and Development** - identify and plan appropriately for individual differences in physical, cognitive and emotional stages of development
- 3) **Teaching and Communication** - use instructional styles and progressions that maximize the success of each athlete and partner
- 4) **Skills and Tactics** - know the sport, individual skills, teams tactics, rules, traditions
- 5) **Organization and Administration** - know and comply with all legal duties of a coach, especially first aid and emergency care
- 6) **Sport Safety and Injury Prevention** - recognize, require and monitor safe behaviors, facilities, equipment and preventive screenings
- 7) **Physical Preparation** - utilize appropriate conditioning for fitness and sport performance
- 8) **Evaluation** - assess player, coach, team, as well as opponent's strengths and weaknesses



### Philosophy and Ethics

---

#### The top-flight Unified Sports coach...

- Believes all athletes and partners have a right and responsibility to contribute to the team.
- Creates a safe environment, allowing all athletes and partners to perform without fear of failure or humiliation.
- Motivates the team by building on individual success and personal effort.

#### Instead of...

- Developing rules for team conduct while making exceptions for more skilled athletes and partners.
- Preaching sportsmanship, but failing to adhere to the spirit and letter of Special Olympics rules.
- Using fear and heightened emotions to motivate athletes and partners.

### Growth and Development

---

#### The top-flight Unified Sports coach...

- Has actions that match commitment to meaningful involvement.
- Uses skill progressions that build confidence and lead to better sport performance.
- Provides opportunities for athletes and partners to build connections between sport and other activities.

#### Instead of...

- Asking for opinions of athletes and partners, but never acting on them.
- Modifying the tactic or skill to guarantee immediate athlete and partner success.
- Expecting athletes and partners to develop friendships just on the sports experience.

### Teaching and Communication

---

#### The top-flight Unified Sports coach...

- Identifies 3-4 outcome goals for each practice, then chooses activities that will lead to achievement.
- Gives specific reinforcement on positive behaviors, instructional feedback after errors.
- Designs drills to challenge each athlete and partner to do better than before.
- Uses athletes and partners to demonstrate techniques.
- Understands the needs of athletes and partners not met when behavior problems occur.
- Uses logical consequences discipline and promotes self-control.
- Ensures athletes and partners actively participate for at least 75 percent of practice time.
- Uses written and verbal instruction to explain drills, identifying key words to use as cues for performance.
- Predetermines how to move from one drill to next, maximizing time and resources.
- Uses repetition of drills as preparation for new skills.
- Plans for one new team, one new individual tactic to be introduced each practice.
- Mixes scrimmage time with game-like drills that structure for improvement.

#### Instead of...

- Planning “activities” to do in practice with no purpose.
- Giving a lot of encouragement to the team in general.
- Expecting all athletes and partners to do same drill with same level of success – 100 percent.
- Personally demonstrating all skills.
- Using zero tolerance approach to misbehavior and discipline.
- Using physical and emotional punishment to control behavior.
- Providing athletes and partners with instruction while they wait their turn in drills.
- Telling athletes and partners what to do by stressing how much or how many repetitions are expected.
- Deciding what drill to do next based on how much time is left for the session.
- Repeating the same drills each practice.
- Introducing new skills all at once.
- Spending more than 25 percent of practice time in scrimmage.

### Skills and Tactics

---

#### The top-flight Unified Sports coach...

- Matches player ability to role on the team and situational play.
- Chooses the offense and defense based on meaningful participation and team performance.
- Assesses and modifies drills to maximize practice time and athlete achievement.
- Allows for maximum repetition to over-learn and retain skills.
- Tells athletes and partners what to do to correct mistakes.

#### Instead of...

- Identifying and labeling athlete and partner responsibilities for each play.
- Fitting the best athletes and partners into the chosen offense or defense.
- Changing to a new drill if athletes or partners are not successful in completing the task.
- Moving on to the next drill as soon as players are successful.
- Telling athletes and partners what they have done wrong.

### Organization and Administration

---

#### The top-flight Unified Sports coach...

- Meets with parents, athletes and partners before participation to explain the need for medical clearance.
- Knows, understands and appreciates the legal responsibilities of the coach.
- Has developed and practiced an emergency medical plan with athletes and partners.

#### Instead of...

- Checking only to see who has medical clearance for tournament play.
- Understanding only the time commitment necessary to be a coach.
- Having only a first aid kit and telephone on site for emergencies.

### Sport Safety and Injury Prevention

---

#### The top-flight Unified Sports coach...

- Controls player dominance by maximizing the strength of the low-ability athletes with team tactics and strategies.
- Works with athletes and partners to check playing area for hazards before beginning practice.
- Keeps medical forms on hand along with record of athlete and partner progress in skills.

#### Instead of...

- Controlling player dominance by restricting the play of high-ability players.
- Acting to remove hazards only once they are noticed.
- Keeping record of athlete and partner attendance and game statistics.

### Physical Preparation

---

#### The top-flight Unified Sports coach...

- Plans and implements conditioning that will improve athlete and partner fitness.
- Identifies contraindicated activities.
- Discusses need for good nutrition and discourages use of alcohol and other drugs.

#### Instead of...

- Planning for strength and conditioning during the season.
- Demonstrating only routine conditioning drills.
- Only making sure there is plenty of water available for the athletes and partners.

### Evaluation

#### The top-flight Unified Sports coach...

- Uses skills tests routinely throughout the season to measure athlete and partner progress and team makeup.
- Sets team and individual goals in line with athlete and partner expectations.
- Asks for formal and informal feedback from athletes, partners and parents throughout the season.
- Gives feedback to assistant coaches and volunteers.

#### Instead of...

- Only using skill tests when required for divisioning.
- Establishing win-loss record as a team goal.
- Routinely telling everyone they are doing a good job.
- Only sending a thank you note to all volunteers and assistant coaches.





## 2.5.2 Unified Sports Coach Guidelines

Guidelines for being an effective coach include:

### **Have the Necessary Knowledge**

**Sports** - Coaches must possess a strong knowledge of the sport and the rules. In addition, coaches must be able to apply that knowledge in practice and competition settings. Take part in approved coaches' education to upgrade knowledge of the sport, new practice activities and game strategies, and to share ideas with other coaches.

**Special Olympics** - Special Olympics Programs may offer Unified Sports training as a standalone session or a part of a sport-specific coaches' training school. Take advantage of available training courses and develop a network with other Special Olympics coaches.

**Select the Right Team Members** - All teammates should be selected based on appropriate age and ability matching as specifically defined by the sport. Additionally, they must understand and accept their roles as teammates, adhere to the philosophy of Unified Sports and commit to full participation in a sportsmanlike manner.

**Don't Play** - Team sports (e.g., basketball, softball, football (soccer), volleyball, floor hockey, team handball) require a non-playing head coach. In these sports, it is a priority for the coach to manage the interaction between team members. Having non-playing coaches helps to prevent the coach from losing this all-important perspective.

**Commit to Practice** - Each coach must encourage regular attendance at training sessions for all teammates. This leads to improved sports skills, increased teamwork and camaraderie, and refined performance during games and competitions. A coach should develop a practice plan that includes warm-up, stretching, sports skills development, strategies, a competition experience and cool-down components. Every player should receive a minimum of one and one-half hours of team practice per week under the direction of a qualified coach. It is more



beneficial, of course, to practice more often than once a week. Minimum standards for the number of practices that each team member must attend in order to participate in competition should be developed.

**Coach Everyone on the Team** - Every member of the squad (athletes and partners) will benefit from the direction of a qualified coach. Find ways to involve each team member in conditioning, skill development and teamwork.

**Demand Teamwork** - To promote meaningful involvement by all team members, no one should dominate competition; this violates the philosophy of Unified Sports. A solid teamwork approach should be present from the first practice to the final competition.

**Value More than Practice and Competition** - Support the efforts of your team to extend their relationships beyond the competition arena. The Unified Sports motto is, "During the games, we are teammates; after the games, we are friends."



### 2.5.3 Coaching Techniques for Promoting Team Cohesion

On any sports team, team spirit and player cohesion are critical parts of team success. Positive interactions between players may not always happen on their own. It is the coach's job to promote these interactions. In Unified Sports and in all levels of sports participation, successful teamwork is not only philosophically desirable, it also leads to better team performance.

#### Coaching Tips

**The first meeting of the team is extremely important.** Building team cohesion should be the focal point of the opening training session. A well-designed plan should be developed and implemented.

**Partners are on the team to play, not coach.** It is essential in Unified Sports to have one or more assistant coaches. Otherwise coaches may be forced to use partners for instruction.

**Educate all players about the philosophy and goals of Unified Sports.** Do not assume players will understand the purpose of the program. It is the coach's decision whether to conduct a separate orientation for partners so they may be more comfortable asking questions.

**Treat all players as equals.** When talking to team members, do not label "athletes" and "partners;" everyone is a player or a teammate. When setting up for a practice, share responsibilities among all players.

**Coach everyone on the team.** All players should feel that they are improving their skills at each practice.

**Involve all team members at practice.** Use different players to lead stretching exercises, introduce fun pairs exercises to stimulate interaction and be sure to switch partners frequently so everyone gets to know each other.

**Design challenging drills.** Mix the combination of players that work together. Create activities that offer challenges to everyone without diminishing the role of lower-ability players.

**Use team scrimmages to establish channels for communication.** Provide athletes and partners opportunities to be captains. Encourage communication. Set the model for appropriate communication. Ask for feedback from all players.

**Coach everyone at competitions.** Avoid directing coaching comments only toward the athletes. Put partners in positions that complement athletes (just as in practice).

**Socialize after competitions.** Plan some social time following competitions where teammate interaction is encouraged.

---

*“We are not all identical. Others may have more ability than you have – they may be larger, faster, quicker, stronger and superior in other physical attributes – but no one should be your superior in such very important qualities and characteristics as team spirit, enthusiasm, industriousness, cooperation, loyalty, determination, honesty, sincerity, reliability and integrity. Acquire and keep these traits and success is assured.”*

*-John Wooden, former UCLA Basketball Coach*

---

---

*“Our team’s getting better.  
We’re gelling because we’re  
getting everyone involved.”*

*-Brian Georgi, Unified Sports Partner*

---



## 2.6 Selection of Team Members

The key to the successful development of a Unified Sports team is the proper selection of team members (a proportionate number of athletes and partners). Here are the primary considerations:

**Ability Grouping** - Unified Sports teams work best when all team members have similar sports skills. Partners with abilities that are far superior to other teammates will either control competition or make accommodations by not competing to their potential. In both situations, the goals of interaction and teamwork are diminished and a true competitive experience is not achieved. (See pages 8-9 on “Roster Composition.”) Special Olympics Sports Skills Assessments are very helpful in determining the ability levels of all participants, especially for newly formed teams. However, skill assessments need to be used in conjunction with evaluating players in competition settings such as scrimmages.

**Age Grouping** - All team members should be closely matched in age—within three to five years for participants 21 years of age and under, and within 10 to 15 years for athletes 22 years of age and over, based on the risk within the sport. For example, in the sport of football (soccer), an 8-year-old should not be competing against a 30-year-old athlete. However, in an individual sport such as golf, a greater age disparity may be acceptable.

**Readiness** - All teammates should possess the requisite skills to compete in the sport. Not every athlete is ready to participate in Special Olympics Unified Sports. Participation in team sports requires an understanding of teamwork, team strategy and rules as well as the requisite skills to compete successfully in that sport. If an athlete is not ready for Unified Sports, Special Olympics offers a variety of alternative choices that provide functional sports skills training and meaningful competition experiences.

**Outreach** - Participants can be new or existing Special Olympics athletes. Unified Sports is a particularly appealing program for schools and service agencies that stress inclusion and may resist traditional Special Olympics programs. Additionally, Unified Sports is a program suited for higher-ability athletes who may have avoided Special Olympics because of a perceived stigma. Use Unified Sports to reach athletes not currently involved in Special Olympics.





### 2.6.1 Principle of Meaningful Involvement

Unified Sports embraces the philosophy and principles of Special Olympics. Consequently, Unified Sports teams are organized to provide meaningful involvement for all participants. Every teammate should play a role and have the opportunity to contribute to the team.

Meaningful involvement also refers to the quality of interaction and competition within a Unified Sports team. Achieving meaningful involvement by all participants on the team ensures a positive and rewarding experience for everyone.

#### Indicators of Meaningful Involvement

- Teammates compete without causing undue risk of injury to themselves or others.
- Teammates participate according to the rules of competition.
- Teammates have the ability and opportunity to contribute to the performance of the team.
- Teammates understand how to blend their skills with those of other athletes, resulting in improved performance by athletes with lesser ability.

#### Meaningful involvement is not achieved when certain team members (usually partners) . . .

- Have superior sports skills in comparison to their fellow team members.
- Serve predominantly as on-field coaches rather than teammates.
- Control most aspects of the competition during critical periods of the game.
- Do not train or practice regularly and only show up on the day of competition.
- Lower their level of ability dramatically so that they do not hurt others or control the entire game.

**Note:** It is important that all coaches and program leaders, prior to the selection of team members, understand the Principle of Meaningful Involvement.

---

*“I don’t see many differences. Athletes and partners both want to compete. And everyone wants to have fun.”*

*-Don Hess, Unified Sports Coach*

---



## 2.6.2 Partner Recruitment

Whether recruiting individuals familiar with Special Olympics or not, it is important to plan your approach so partners contribute to the success of the program.

### The “Warm Body” Approach

This is the easiest approach. You are using this approach when you advertise for partners in a newsletter, flyer or other highly public ways. Though this approach may reach the largest number of candidates, you must properly screen interested applicants and be able to tell some people they don’t fit your team’s profile (age, ability, attitude).

### The Targeted Approach

This is the preferred approach. This involves carefully determining the “types” of partners appropriate for the team and the best person to invite them. When you use the targeted approach, you answer the following questions before you approach prospective partners:

- What are the skills/attitudes needed to be a partner on this team? (If we draw a picture of the type of partner who would be best for our team, what would they look like? Age, gender, ability, hobbies, occupations, related interests, etc., would be pertinent areas of consideration.
- Based on this picture, where can we find these types of people? (Think about work settings, education, leisure time activities, publications they might read, parts of town, etc.)
- What motivations can we appeal to in our recruitment effort? (Improved fitness, socialization, giving back to the community, meeting new people, travel, etc.)

## 2.7 Where to Recruit Teammates

Whether recruiting individuals familiar with Special Olympics or not, it is important to plan your approach so partners contribute to the success of the program.

Most Unified Sports teams are formed in one of four primary ways:

- **Family/Friends:** Identifying a group of appropriate level Special Olympics athletes and asking their families, friends, and acquaintances to participate.
- **School:** Identifying school programs headed by a teacher or coach who proceeds to recruit students within the school to participate.

- **Universities/Colleges:** Identifying programs of study in physical education, coaching, recreation or special education and offer Unified Sports participation as an avenue for service learning, field experience or volunteer opportunities.
- **Community:** Identifying individuals playing on community-based recreational/corporate leagues and asking them to participate on a Unified Sports team.

## 2.8 Where to Start

### Existing Special Olympics Teams

If you have a group of Special Olympics athletes and want to form a Unified Sports team, one of the first places to look for partners is in the lives of these athletes—their families and friends. Ask the Special Olympics athletes and their families for suggestions of potential partners’ names. Emphasize the need for the partners to be of the same ability and age as the Special Olympics athletes. Starting from this base is traditionally the easiest way to initially recruit prospective partners. If you advertise for partners, make sure to use terms like “novice,” “no experience necessary” or “learn a new sport” to avoid recruiting players with very high skills.

Schedule a day when all partners and Special Olympics athletes take the Sports Skills Assessment Tests and participate in a mini-scrimmage to determine which partners represent excellent candidates for your team. Remember, you will be doing a disservice to your team if you keep partners who possess ability levels much greater than the Special Olympics athletes. It is important to redirect those partners who fail to fall into the appropriate ability-level range.

If you require additional partners, the next place to look is within your local Special Olympics Program’s network of volunteers. Either ask these volunteers to play or ask them for suggestions of potential teammates. When approaching these individuals, make sure you provide them with a description of the composite ability level of the players on your Unified Sports team so they will understand the type of individual you need. For example, church groups, service clubs, Boy Scout and Girl Scout groups can be good sources of partners.

After recruiting new potential team members, schedule a practice and evaluate these athletes via the Sports Skills Assessment Tests and have them participate in a mini-scrimmage. Again, it is important to retain only those partners who have similar abilities with the rest



of the team. Some preliminary work on the coach's or program leader's part will ensure a meaningful experience for everybody.

### **School-Based Program**

When beginning a Unified Sports team within a school, it is extremely important to involve the physical education teacher and/or another teacher who knows the level of sports skills and physical fitness levels of the students. These teachers provide valuable insight into the types of students who would make excellent partners and who would also personally benefit from involvement.

Generally, the students who make the best partners have an interest in sports participation, but might not have competed at the interscholastic level in that sport or in another sport that requires similar skills. Students who have participated in intramural sports and recreational sports programs, and who are looking for additional competition opportunities, would be prime candidates.

When recruiting students, it is important to emphasize the benefits of being a member of the Unified Sports team and to elevate it to a respected status within the school. In addition, it is important these students understand that they are teammates with the Special Olympics athletes and are not serving as on-field coaches.

Other sources of partners may come from students considering careers in special education, therapeutic recreation or social service programs. University programs in physical education and recreation are seeking opportunities to train coaches and recreation sport leaders. There may also be additional resources such as facility sharing, access to a pool of qualified officials and enhanced networking with other organizations with similar mission and goals. Many students with extensive sports knowledge will come to Special Olympics for the first time because of class requirements. Research indicates that service learning in conjunction with academic career training is a powerful influence in building commitment toward volunteer activities.

Several states require students to complete volunteer work in order to graduate. Offering the opportunity to complete this requirement can attract appropriate partners who may not normally choose to participate in a sport.

Once partners have been recruited, schedule an initial practice where the Sports Skills Assessment Tests are administered to athletes and partners. Additionally,

conduct a mini-scrimmage. Once again, those partners who fall outside the ability level of the team should not participate, but could be encouraged to remain involved as assistant coaches. Continue to recruit until you have a desirable composition of team members of similar ability levels.

A school setting also requires efforts to make the Unified Sports program accepted within the school community. This experience will be new for students and faculty alike, so steps need to be taken to both highlight the Unified Sports team and engender school pride in it. One way to raise the acceptability of the program is to have the school's varsity interscholastic coaches and team members demonstrate outward support by scheduling a Unified Sports competition with another school prior to a varsity sports event. All members of the Unified Sports team should feel that they are an important part of the school's sports program.

### **Recreation/Corporate Leagues**

When setting up Unified Sports teams as part of existing community-based recreation or corporate leagues, target individuals who have an interest in competing in a league setting, but do not currently play on a team. Work with the league's director to identify individuals not playing on a team who have inquired about competition opportunities as a first step.

Second, speak with coaches and members of existing league teams about friends or co-workers who might be interested in playing on a Unified Sports team. These are people who do not possess the skills to compete at the same level as their friends or co-workers, but have an interest in playing sports in a competitive environment.

From these sources, contact a pool of potential partners and describe the concept and philosophy of Unified Sports and the type of players you are trying to recruit for the team. Schedule a practice for partners and Special Olympics athletes and administer the Sports Skills Assessment Tests. Ask those individuals of similar ability levels to join the team. While it may be a difficult task to turn away higher-ability level players who are interested in playing, remember Unified Sports opportunities must provide meaningful involvement for all participants. If appropriate, ask these individuals if they would like to be involved as assistant coaches.

## 2.9 Special Olympics Unified Sports Teammate Guidelines

The best team is one in which all teammates (athletes and partners) play a meaningful role and contribute to the success of that team.

### **On a good Unified Sports team, everyone:**

**Makes a Commitment** – Joining a team is fun, but it also comes with a serious commitment. Each Special Olympics Unified Sports team is expected to train and compete at least eight weeks before the culminating competition. Practice is essential to the development of physical conditioning, sports skills, game strategies, teamwork and team spirit. Each team member attends practice regularly.

**Knows the Rules** – All Special Olympics Unified Sports competitions are conducted according to a specific set of rules. Learning these rules and competing by them in a sportsmanlike manner ensures a positive experience.

**Does their Best** – Every competitor on a Unified Sports team should compete to the best of his or her abilities within the framework of the team. Teammates that dominate competition when doing their best should be placed on a team more compatible with their skill level. The coach should then recruit another individual whose abilities are similar to the other members on the team.

**Is a Good Teammate and Team Player** – It is the teammate's responsibility to establish peer relationships with the other team members and to compete within the framework established by the coach. Practices and competitions are only part of the experience of sports. Utilize time before or after organized team activities to get to know new teammates.

### **Suggested Standards for Unified Sports Team Membership (athletes and partners):**

- 1) Each team member must attend a minimum of 80 percent of team practices.
- 2) Transportation to practices is typically the responsibility of each individual. Participants who drive may help transport others on the team, but this is not a criterion for membership on the team.
- 3) Determining team strategy and directing individual involvement is the role of the coach, not the partners. All players must respect each other's equality as teammates, and allow the coach to provide primary leadership of the team.
- 4) When the Unified Sports team attends a game, tournament or other event:
  - a) All members are expected to travel together as a team.
  - b) All members are expected to attend related activities (such as Opening Ceremonies, Olympic Town, Dances and Clinics) as a team.
  - c) If an overnight stay is involved, all team members will be housed together in the same hotel, dormitory, etc. The coach, based on input from team members, makes room assignments.
- 5) The coach will make exceptions to Guideline #4 on an individual basis. Under no circumstances will exceptions be made that significantly diminish the goals of team unity.

**Note:** During extended events (e.g., World Games), policies and procedures may be established that allow team members to participate in some activities outside of the delegation.

---

*“Within a short amount of time it gets blended together and teammates are off to the job of playing basketball or softball. The idea of being ‘special’ gets lost.”*

*-Fred McNulty, Special Education Director*

---

## 2.10 Sportsmanship

In perception and practice, sportsmanship is defined as those qualities that are characterized by generosity and genuine concern for others. The ideals of sportsmanship should always be exemplified in Special Olympics Unified Sports competition.

Individuals, regardless of their role in activities, are expected to be aware of their influence on the behavior of others and model good sportsmanship.

### Expectations of Coaches

- Always set a good example for participants and fans to follow.
- Instruct participants in proper sportsmanship responsibilities and demand that they make sportsmanship and ethics the top priorities.
- Respect judgment of contest officials, abide by rules of the event and display no behavior that could incite fans.
- Treat opposing coaches, directors, participants and fans with respect.
- Shake hands with officials and the opposing coach in public.
- Develop and enforce penalties for participants who do not abide by sportsmanship standards.

### Expectations of Athletes and Partners

- Treat teammates with respect.
- Encourage teammates when they make a mistake.
- Treat opponents with respect: shake hands prior to and after contests.
- Respect judgment of contest officials, abide by rules of the contest and display no behavior that could incite fans.
- Cooperate with officials, coaches or directors and fellow participants to conduct a fair contest.
- Do not retaliate (verbally or physically) if the other team demonstrates poor behavior.
- Accept seriously the responsibility and privilege of representing Special Olympics.
- Define winning as doing your personal best.
- Live up to the high standard of sportsmanship established by your coach.

---

*“I’m playing on the Unified Sports team. You should go out for a team if you love to play.”*

*-Matt Boone, Unified Sports Athlete*

---



### 3.1 Training

Unified Sports teams should participate in a minimum of eight weeks of training (that includes practices, scrimmages and competitions) before competing in a culminating championship event. Participation in leagues or other competitive experiences inside or outside Special Olympics is highly encouraged as an additional means of preparing for higher-level competition.

### 3.2 Local Competition

Opportunities to take part in local competitions are critical to the success of a Unified Sports team. Participation in a local Program should lead to entry into higher levels of competitions at the sub-Program, Program, Regional, National or World levels. The following are some models for creating local competition opportunities:

**Special Olympics Unified Sports League** - A league may be sanctioned by a Special Olympics Program when three or more Unified Sports teams compete a minimum of five times. It is suggested that these competitions be conducted on a weekly basis and Special Olympics awards presented at the end of league play.

**Special Olympics Unified Sports Local Tournament** - If weekly league competition is not possible, one- or two-day tournaments may be held with each team competing at least twice. Special Olympics may sanction these tournaments. This is a good alternative for teams from rural areas.

**Community League** - A Unified Sports team may participate in a community recreation league (sanctioned by the Parks and Recreation Department, YMCA, etc.) against non-Unified Sports teams. A Unified Sports team would participate according to the community league's rules and guidelines and would receive awards according to their standards.

Unified Sports teams competing in a community league should check the ability level of the league to ensure their team would be compatible with the rest of the teams. The coach, if possible, should watch a practice, scrimmage or competition involving teams in the league before registering the Unified Sports team.



### 3.3 Program Competition

Unified Sports competitions should be conducted at the Program (state/provincial) level. These competitions provide visibility for Unified Sports and incentives for advancement from lower levels of competition. They also help set standards for the development of quality area or local Programs.

**Existing Special Olympics Event** - Unified Sports may be conducted as part of an existing Special Olympics Program-level sports competition, using the same dates, sites, volunteers, etc.

**Special Olympics Unified Sports Event** - Unified Sports may be conducted as a separate Program (state/provincial)-level championship event.

**Existing Community Events** - Unified Sports may be conducted as a part of an existing community competition. For example, a Unified Sports division can be added as a part of a long-distance road race. Unified Sports athletes compete alongside all other competitors, but not against these participants. Scoring and awards are done according to Unified Sports rules. In some cases, Unified Sports athletes are also eligible for the road race awards.

*sportsmanship*



### 3.4 Guidelines for a Successful Unified Sports Competition

- 1) **Conduct a Unified Sports training session for all coaches before they become involved with their Unified Sports teams.** Most importantly, emphasize “Meaningful Involvement” and “Team Selection.” Emphasize the need for their team’s members to fully understand the philosophy and principles of Unified Sports by conducting an orientation for all team members before they become involved with the team. This information emphasizes their role of being teammates and participating to the best of their ability in both training and competition.
- 2) **Conduct sports-specific training for coaches.** Coaches must understand the fundamentals and basic skills of the sport. All coaches should seek Special Olympics coaching certification in the sport they are going to direct. Providing athletes and partners with the best technical instruction will go a long way toward promoting meaningful participation by all.
- 3) **Make sure all participants are registered with Special Olympics.** All Special Olympics rules and regulations apply equally to athletes and partners with the following exception: Partners are required to complete a “Unified Sports Partner Application” which includes an applicant’s contact information, release from liability and background information. Partners are not required to have a medical form, though some Programs make this a local requirement.

- 4) **Require coaches to submit information on the ability level of their Unified Sports teams.** This information includes Special Olympics Sports Skills Assessment Test scores for all team sport members and performance scores for all individual sport team members. It also includes a team’s previous experience (if the team has participated together for more than one year). The information is placed on the Team Roster and Ability Assessment Form and submitted with the Unified Sports team’s entry to the competition.
- 5) **Consider having the coach and the head of delegation sign an assurance statement.** The following page contains a sample assurance form where Program leaders verify that their team(s) has been organized according to the standards outlined in this handbook. The form clarifies that teams may be disqualified for failure to respect the philosophy of Special Olympics Unified Sports.
- 6) **Before the competition, fully prepare your Sports Rules Committee and Officials.** This will enable the Committee to effectively respond to situations and rules violations. Also, the Sports Rules Committee’s method of responding to these situations and protests should be carefully explained to the head coaches at the first coaches’ meeting.
- 7) **Conduct on-site divisioning.** Special Olympics rules require teams to compete against other teams of similar age and ability. In order to group teams appropriately in their proper ability division, it is important to conduct a divisioning round prior to the start of any event. Officials viewing the divisioning rounds will be able to accurately assess each team’s ability level and place teams in divisions with others of a similar level. The divisioning round consists of short scrimmages between various teams so accurate evaluations can be made.





## Unified Sports Team Participation Agreement

It is critical that teams competing in Special Olympics Unified Sports competitions understand and abide by the Special Olympics Unified Sports model rules, philosophy and intent. To ensure that Special Olympics Unified Sports continues to grow and that Programs and spectators see the correct presentation of Unified Sports competitions, the following must be adhered to, understood and implemented by teams sending athletes and partners to participate in Unified Sports competitions.

- 1) Unified Sports team rosters shall be comprised of a proportionate number of teammates with intellectual disabilities (athletes) and teammates without intellectual disabilities (partners).
- 2) Coaches of Unified Sports teams may not participate as a partner during the competition.
- 3) In consideration of safety and dominant play, no player shall be selected for a team who has an ability level that is significantly higher or lower than other players on the team.
- 4) The composition of a Unified Sports team shall not include players who, because of an ability level disproportionate to that of their teammates, are able to:
  - a) dominate play;
  - b) exclude other teammates from contributing to the success of the team; or
  - c) present a health and safety risk on the field of play.
- 5) The intent of Unified Sports is to give Special Olympics athletes an opportunity to play side by side at the same skill level with their teammates without intellectual disabilities.

### Agreement:

I have read the above memorandum and pledge that our Unified Sports team is organized in accordance with the Special Olympics Unified Sports program model. I understand the rules, philosophy and intent of this program and agree to abide by these guiding policies and principles. Failure to abide by the guiding policies and principles will result in disqualification.

---

**Signature of Head Coach, Unified Sports Team**

**Name of Sport**

---

**Signature of Head of Delegation**

**Name of Delegation**

## Section D Exercises and Checklists

---

### 4.1 Special Olympics Unified Sports Coach Development Exercise

*You are a local Program Coordinator seeking to start a Unified Sports program.*

**What are characteristics of a good Unified Sports coach?**

- |         |          |
|---------|----------|
| 1 _____ | 6 _____  |
| 2 _____ | 7 _____  |
| 3 _____ | 8 _____  |
| 4 _____ | 9 _____  |
| 5 _____ | 10 _____ |

**Of these, which are the three most important?**

- 1 \_\_\_\_\_
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**List specific ways this coach might promote teamwork between athletes and partners.**

- 1 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 4 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 5 \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## 4.2 Special Olympics Unified Sports Team Development Exercise

*Directions: Your assigned group should work together to develop a plan for starting a Unified Sports team in their assigned setting.*

<p><b>Program 1:</b> Sport: Basketball Setting: School</p>	<p><b>Program 3:</b> Sport: Long-distance running Setting: Adult Rehab Center</p>
<p><b>Program 2:</b> Sport: Football (Soccer) Setting: Community-based Program</p>	<p><b>Program 4:</b> Sport: Bowling Setting: Group home</p>

A. How and where will you **recruit** partners?

1. What are the skills/attitudes needed to be a partner on this team?

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Based on this picture, where can we find these types of people?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. What motivations can we appeal to in our recruitment effort?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. Who is the best person to invite prospective partners? \_\_\_\_\_

B. How will you **assess ability levels** of athletes and partners?

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

C. What are the “**team rules?**” (To be a team member you must...)

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

Are any of these rules just for partners? Just for athletes? \_\_\_\_\_



Special Olympics Unified Sports Team Development Exercise (cont'd)

D. How will you **educate** athletes, partners and coaches for involvement on the team?

Athletes: \_\_\_\_\_

Partners: \_\_\_\_\_

Coaches: \_\_\_\_\_

E. In what **types of competition** will you enter this team?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

F. List several **budget items** for this team. Are any unique to Unified Sports?

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

### 4.3 Special Olympics Unified Sports Situations - *What if this happened to you?*

#### **Situation 1**

You have recruited participants for the past month and have just enough athletes for your Unified Sports volleyball team. Your concern is that a couple of the athletes do not have the basic sport skills to play.

Response: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### **Situation 2**

You are the Tournament Director at the state/provincial Unified Sports soccer tournament. A coach complains that the opposing team has a player who is totally dominating the game, and files a protest at halftime of the game.

Response: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### **Situation 3**

There are two figure skaters competing together in Pairs competition. One of the skaters is a mid-level Special Olympics athlete. The other skater is a high-level skater who successfully competes in sport federation events. You, as the coach of another Pairs team, have gone to extensive trouble to recruit an athlete and partner who match in ability.

Response: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### **Situation 4**

A basketball team registers for competition. In reviewing the rosters, you notice that one team has two partners and eight athletes. When you confront the coach, he states that the roster meets the requirements of the number of partners mandated on the court.

Response: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### **Situation 5**

In a Unified Sports cycling road race, the score is based on the time of the last team member crossing the finish line. Your Special Olympics athlete, who is trying his best, falls behind. His partner, who has superior ability, drops back and paces the athlete to the finish line. What do you say to the partner?

Response: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

#### 4.4 Special Olympics Unified Sports Team Checklist

- Select the sport you will implement.
- Recruit and train a head coach and assistant coaches.
- Secure practice facilities.
- Determine the target recruitment group(s) for team members.
  - High School
  - Adults
  - Females
  - Youth
  - Other
  
- Develop a plan to inform schools, agencies or community centers about who may participate.
- Hold tryouts for Special Olympics athletes and partners.
- Set minimum standards for participation on the team (for example, all team members practice at least one hour per week for eight weeks and must compete in two scheduled competitions).
  - Number of training hours and practices
  - Number of competitions
  
- Prepare and distribute the practice schedule.
- Prepare and distribute the competition schedule (e.g., league play, local tournaments, culminating event).
- Get team uniforms and equipment.
- Provide guidance and assistance to the team throughout the season.
- Evaluate and congratulate.

#### 4.5 Special Olympics Unified Sports Self-Evaluation Checklist

##### **Evaluate your Unified Sports Team**

If the answer to any of the questions below is “yes,” your team is probably inappropriate for entry in official Special Olympics Unified Sports competition according to Meaningful Involvement guidelines.

1. Is there an athlete or partner on the team who, when competing at his or her highest ability level, would place other athletes on the team or on an opposing team at risk of injury?
2. Is the composition of the team such that all partners are higher skilled than athletes with intellectual disabilities?
3. In order for a competition to be conducted by the rules and at the same time allow for safe and meaningful involvement of all team members, do certain teammates lower their level of skill and not compete as hard as they are capable?
4. Are there partners on the team who are so highly skilled that no other member of the team could defend him or her in a competitive situation? (Specifically, this person could score at any time he or she chooses.)
5. Are there athletes on the team who either do not have the requisite sports skills or do not understand the rules necessary to compete? Do they need significant assistance from teammates? Must the rules be significantly modified above and beyond Official Special Olympics Sports Rules adaptations?
6. Are there athletes on the team who, in a competitive situation, rarely touch the ball or participate in competition because of their low ability level?
7. Are there athletes or partners on the team who do not compete in more than 50 percent of all league competitions?
8. Are there athletes or partners on the team who do not attend more than 50 percent of the practices during a season?
9. Will the team fail to train and compete together as a team for a minimum of eight weeks before entry in a culminating Special Olympics competition?



## 4.6 Special Olympics Unified Sports Quick Reference Guide

**Definition:** Special Olympics Unified Sports is a program that combines approximately equal numbers of Special Olympics athletes and athletes without intellectual disabilities (partners) on sports teams for training and competition.

**Partner Eligibility:** The desired objectives of a Unified Sports experience are best fulfilled when partners on a team are individuals without disabilities. Even though an individual with a disability may make an appropriate partner, “Special Olympics Unified Sports teams should never be comprised solely of people with disabilities.” (Timothy Shriver, Chairman and CEO, Special Olympics, 3 December 1998)

**Rules:** National Governing Body (NGB) rules are enforced unless they are in conflict with Special Olympics modifications. **Unified Sports rules require:**

- A roster containing proportionate numbers of athletes and partners.
- A line-up during the competition in which half of the participants are athletes, and half of the participants are partners.
- Teams divisioned for competition based primarily on ability.
- All individuals on the team receive Special Olympics awards.
- An adult, non-playing coach for team sports.

**Criteria for a Successful Unified Sports Program:** Special Olympics adopted Unified Sports in 1989 to expand sports opportunities for athletes seeking new challenges while dramatically increasing their inclusion in the community. Extensive field-testing has demonstrated that Unified Sports teams are most likely to accomplish the goals of the program when the following criteria are met:

- An appropriate sport is selected - A variety of factors influence the determination of which sport is chosen for Unified Sports training and competition. Some of these factors include availability of qualified coaches, ability levels of potential athletes and partners, finances, facilities and opportunities for competition.
- Qualified coaches lead the program - Unified Sports teams should be organized under the guidance of a trained coach who understands the principles of Unified Sports and the rules, techniques, strategies and training regimens of the selected sport.
- Appropriate teammates are selected - 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. Team members should have the requisite 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.
- Quality training leads to competition - All team members of a Unified Sports team shall have a minimum eight weeks of training (practice, scrimmages and league competition) before the culminating championship event.
- 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.

**Additional Training:** Unified Sports training can be offered as a standalone training session or as part of a sport-specific coaches’ training school. In addition to this handbook, a training video also is available. Check with your Program staff to see how you can increase your Unified Sports expertise.



For more information contact:  
Special Olympics, Inc.  
1325 G Street, NW, Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20005 USA

[www.specialolympics.org](http://www.specialolympics.org)  
AOL Keyword: Special Olympics  
e-mail: [info@specialolympics.org](mailto:info@specialolympics.org)



**Special Olympics**

*Created by the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation for the Benefit of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities.*