SPECIAL OLYMPICS
UNIFIED FOOTBALL
WORLD CUP
PARIS 2026

Press Kit

From 5 to 11 July 2026, Paris will host the third edition of the Special Olympics Unified Football World Cup, marking its first-ever European edition following the previous two held in Chicago (2018) and Detroit (2022). France will have the chance to welcome a Special Olympics International event for the first time and Paris will truly become the capital city of inclusive sport.

The announcement of the teams on 19 February at the City Hall in Paris was the first step in setting the stage for the teams who will be competing for the title of Unified Football World Cup champion in July.

For the women's tournament, the teams selected include Azerbaijan, Canada, Costa Rica, Cote d'Ivoire, Egypt, France, Guatemala, Hong Kong, Namibia, Slovakia, Thailand, and USA.

The men's teams are Bharat (India), Brazil, China, Ecuador, France, Israel, Jamaica, Libya, Paraguay, Senegal, Spain, and UAE.

More than an international sporting event, this competition is a celebration of Unified Sport, where teammates with and without intellectual disabilities compete together, and will mark the launch of an ambitious nationwide program to develop inclusive sport across France.

Sport is a powerful driver of social inclusion and health. The Special Olympics Unified Football World Cup Paris 2026 offers a unique opportunity to show the world how sport can unite, inspire and change lives.

President and Chief Executive Officer of Special Olympics International, David Evangelista, shared the hopes for what the Unified Football World Cup aims to achieve, “This summer, Paris will become a global capital of inclusion. Together, we will show the world that when we play Unified, we can live Unified, too.”

Continuing, “This event will not end at the final whistle. The legacy of the Cup, both national and global, is of paramount importance. In partnership with French authorities and the French sport movement, Special Olympics France -and national Special Olympics organizations around the world- will expand its inclusive programs over the next five years; including Athlete Leaders, Health and Wellness Activities, and grassroots Unified initiatives, ensuring that Paris 2026 will have a long-lasting impact.”

Next Step

The next part in the lead up of the Cup will be held on 16 April, at the French Football Headquarters in Paris, when the draw ceremony takes place. The draw determines the group-stage matchups for both the men’s and women’s tournaments. It is done using a lottery system to determine the initial lineups.

With the tournament featuring 24 teams, 12 Men's and 12 Women's, and a champion crowned in each division, there will be two draws done on the 16th to determine group stage matchups.

To begin the draw, Special Olympics France, as the Cup's host team, will be drawn first and placed in group A. The draw is designed to ensure representation from multiple continental regions for each group. This process will then be repeated for groups B, C, and D in both the men's and women's competitions.

The full list of matchups from the draw will be available on the official website.

Section 1: The Special Olympics Movement

Special Olympics is a global organization dedicated to empowering people with and without intellectual disabilities through sport. With programs in nearly 190 countries, the movement brings together 5.6 million athletes.

Founded in 1968 by Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Special Olympics' mission is to create a better, healthier, and more joyful world. One of its core principles is: "One athlete, one volunteer, one family."

Where society sees limitations, sport creates opportunities and transforms lives and Mrs. Shriver put this into action.

Sport is a vital tool for improving mobility and psychological well-being. It also fosters social connections, builds self-esteem, confidence, and courage, and creates opportunities for shared experiences.

Special Olympics France

Founded in 1991, Special Olympics France is an association recognized *of public utility* by French authorities. For more than thirty years, it has been active on the ground, supporting its beneficiaries through sport as well as educational and health programs.

Each year, 100 events are organized, bringing together 2,500 athletes and 300 volunteers.

Pierre Dejoux, President of Special Olympics France, shared, "The emotions experienced by Special Olympics athletes are the same as those of Olympic and Paralympic champions. Let's join forces to change perceptions."

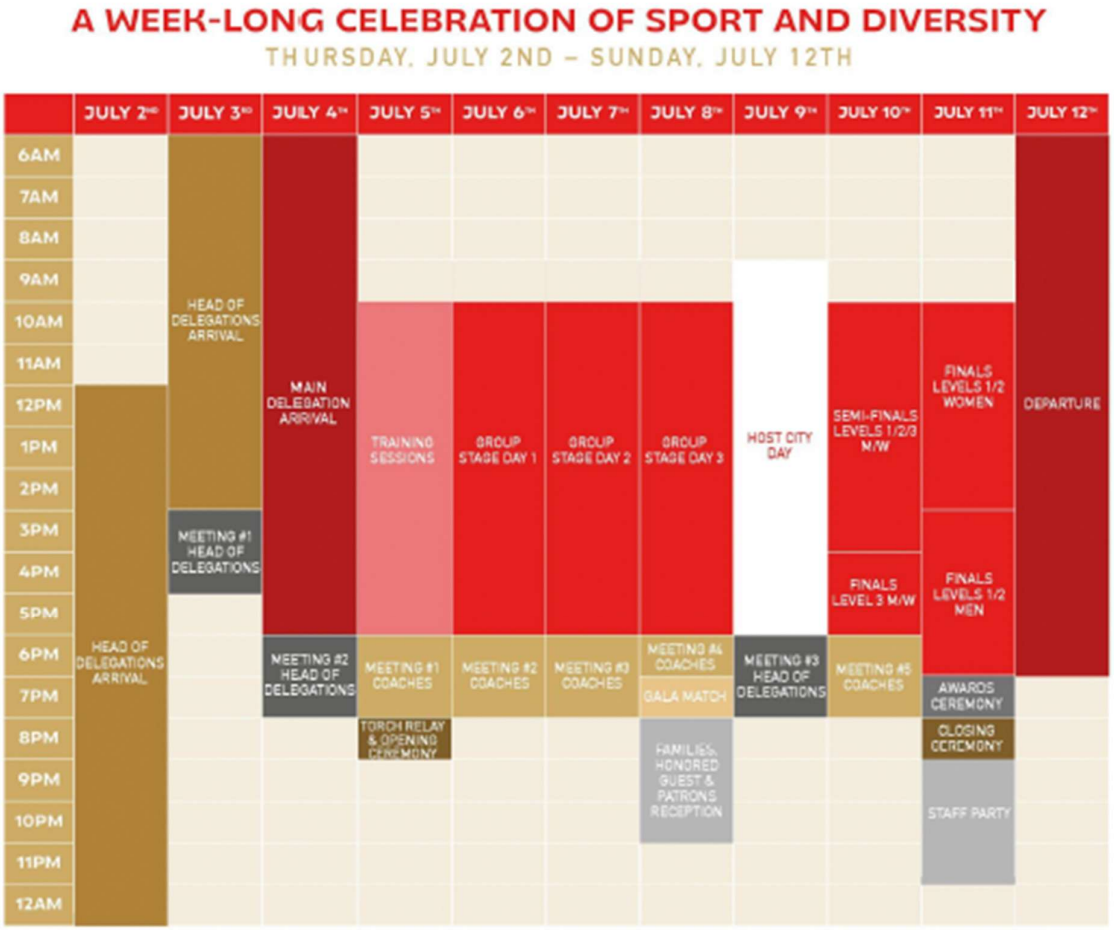
Ambassador for Special Olympics France since 2019, swimming Olympic champion Alain Bernard regularly supports athletes at events and competitions. Deeply committed, he connects with every athlete in a simple and authentic way.

"I am proud to serve as an ambassador for Special Olympics France and to help shine a light on athletes who have long been overlooked by society," commented Alain.

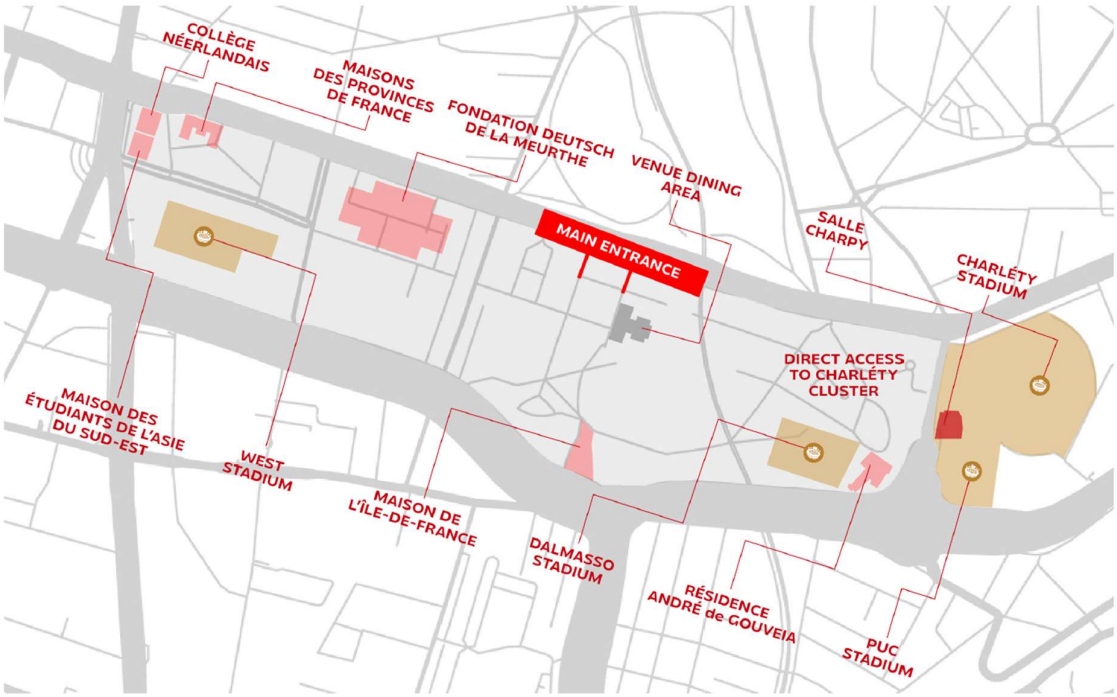
Section 2: The Special Olympics Unified Football World Cup Paris 2025

Over the 6-day competition, teams will compete at two venues: Charlety Stadium and International University City of Paris.

- **324** Players
- **12** Men's teams:
    - **Bharat (India), Brazil, China, Ecuador, France, Israel, Jamaica, Libya, Paraguay, Senegal, Spain, UAE**
    - Each men's team consists of 16 players: 9 teammates with intellectual disability, and 7 Unified partners, teammates without intellectual disabilities.
    - For the men's teams, 11 footballers play at the same time, meaning there will always be 6 Special Olympics teammates and 5 Unified partners on the field.
- **12** Women's teams
    - **Azerbaijan, Canada, Costa Rica, Cote d'Ivoire, Egypt, France, Guatemala, Hong Kong, Namibia, Slovakia, Thailand, USA**
    - Each women's team consists of 11 players: 6 teammates with intellectual disability, and 5 Unified partners, teammates without intellectual disabilities.
    - For the women's teams, 7 footballers play at the same time, meaning there will always be 4 Special Olympics teammates and 3 Unified partners on the field.
- **2** Coaches per team
- **100** Staff Officials
- **450** Volunteers



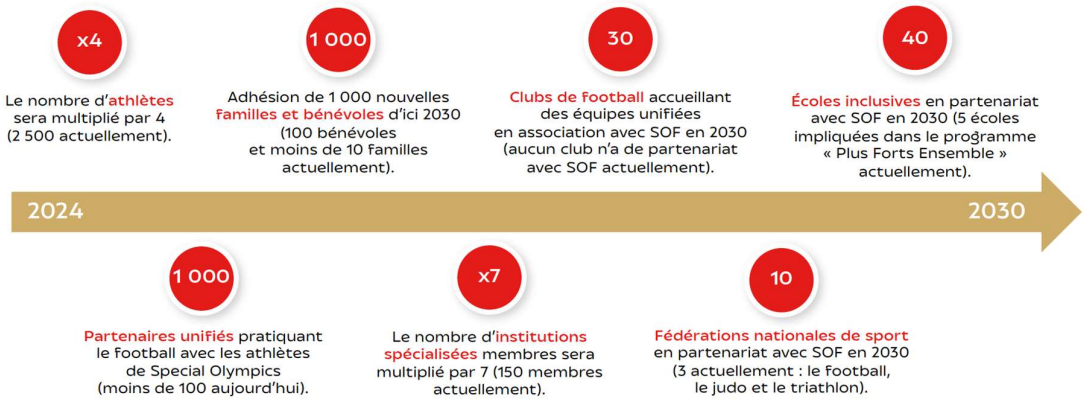
The competition has been designed with athletes, their coaches, and their families in mind, with a single priority: their well-being. All essential facilities, including the stadium and accommodation, are brought together on a single site in Paris: the *Stade Charlety* and the *Cité Internationale Universitaire*.

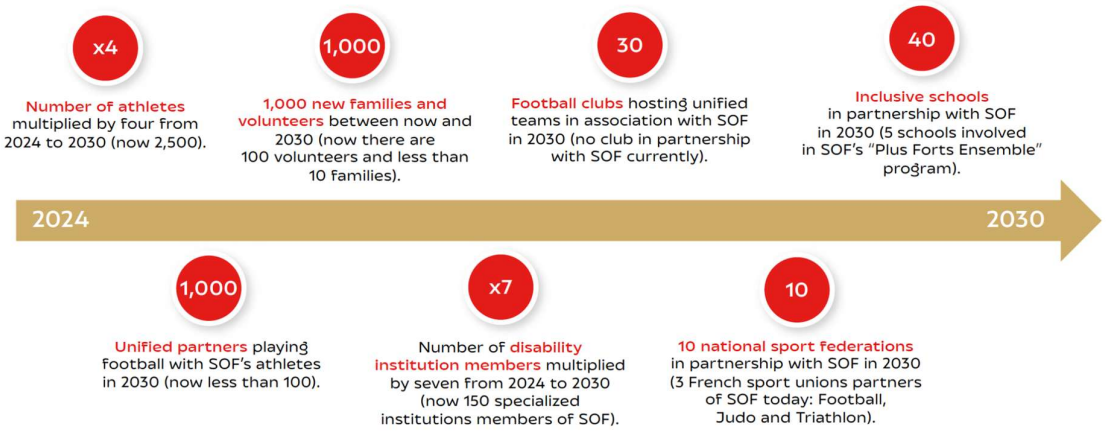


<u>Section 3: Paris 2026 will create a strong and lasting legacy in France centered around Inclusion</u>

The Special Olympics Unified Football World Cup will position Paris as the global capital of inclusive sport. Hosting the competition marks the first step in an ambitious plan to develop inclusive sports in France for people with intellectual disabilities, in partnership with the wider sports community as well as the healthcare and social services sector.

This legacy will be made possible through the commitment of a wonderful community of public and private partners, guided by a set of five-year objectives:





Thanks to football, the world's universal game and the most widely played sport in France, Special Olympics France, and all partners committed to inclusion, will accelerate the development of sport across the country.

UN PROGRAMME CONSTRUIT AUTOUR DE 9 ACTIONS

1. PROGRAMME DE SANTÉ

> Consultations gratuites (podologie, vision et audition) pour tous les athlètes en situation de handicap intellectuel.

Le plus : ouvrir des créneaux aux usagers des établissements médico-sociaux parisiens.

2. JEUNES SPORTIFS

> Activités sportives et démonstrations avec des jeunes, des athlètes de Special Olympics et des ambassadeurs du mouvement et de l'événement.

Le plus : faire découvrir le sport unifié à tous.

3. JEUNES LEADERS DE SPECIAL OLYMPICS

> Depuis sa création, Special Olympics aide des jeunes athlètes en situation de handicap à développer et valoriser leurs compétences.

Le plus : faire émerger une génération d'athlètes leaders Special Olympics France issus de la Coupe internationale de football unifié .

4. ÉCOLE INCLUSIVE

> Sessions de sport unifié organisées dans des écoles parisiennes en partenariat avec les instituts médico-éducatifs locaux.

Le plus : organiser un tournoi des écoles parisiennes.

5. FORUM POLITIQUE

> Cycle de conférences scientifiques sur les thèmes de la déficience intellectuelle, l'inclusion et l'autodétermination des personnes en situation de handicap.

Le plus : faire adhérer de plus en plus de décideurs et de leaders d'opinion à la cause de l'inclusion.

6. JOUR CULTUREL

> Une journée de visites pour les délégations et les personnes accompagnantes dans les lieux iconiques et de loisirs de l'Île-de-France.

Le plus : des guides de visites en méthode « FALC » (facile à lire et à comprendre).

7. CLUBS DE FOOTBALL INCLUSIFS

> Faire entrer le football unifié dans un maximum de clubs de football d'Île-de-France.

Le plus : ouvrir les clubs de football aux personnes en situation de handicap intellectuel.

8. PROGRAMME MÉDIATIQUE

> Offrir aux journalistes des accès aux formations sur comment couvrir des sujets sur les personnes en situation de handicap et inclure au sein des équipes médiatiques un groupe de jeunes porteurs de handicap intellectuel à travers un programme d'un an.

Le plus : améliorer la couverture médiatique sur les enjeux de l'inclusion.

9. PROGRAMME VOLONTARIAT : VOLONTAIRES SUR L'ÉVÉNEMENT

> Intégration des personnes en situation de handicap intellectuel comme volontaires de l'événement avec une formation adaptée et des tuteurs favorisant leur pleine intégration dans les effectifs de l'événement.

Le plus : une approche inclusive de l'organisation d'événements.

Special Olympics is not just a sports organization; above all, it is a movement that fosters inclusion through educational, cultural, and health programs.

Special Olympics France is committed to improving access to healthcare for its athletes with intellectual disabilities. Since 2005, three nationwide programs have been implemented: vision with Special Olympics Lions Clubs International Opening Eyes®, hearing with “Hearing Well”, and podiatry with “Healthy Feet”. Nearly 15,000 free health screenings have been carried out by volunteer healthcare professionals.

On November 25th, a Health Programs Day was held in Paris, bringing together 160 children and adults with intellectual disabilities from 10 healthcare and social service institutions, alongside 21 preschool students. A total of 260 screenings were conducted.

Building on the momentum generated by the Unified Football World Cup, Special Olympics France will be able to strengthen its existing programs and develop new initiatives by 2028, including a dedicated nutrition program and the launch of a comprehensive health program in partnership with local healthcare centers.

Voices of Support

Natalia Vodianova, Model, Philanthropist, Film Actress, and Member of the Special Olympics International Board of Directors

“The Paris 2026 Unified World Cup is more than just football. It is about bringing people together and proving that sport has the power to unite in ways that go far beyond the pitch. The Unified Football World Cup is simple but demanding, Athletes with and without intellectual disabilities train together, compete against each other but always rely on one another. It transforms the way teammates see

each other and, in turn, how families, schools, clubs, and employers perceive disability. It also sets a standard for the city and its institutions: inclusion must be planned, supported, and funded to become the norm."

Gilmour Borg, Football player and Special Olympics Sargent Shriver Global Messenger
"Playing Unified football changed my life because it showed me that when people with and without disabilities come together, we become stronger as one team. I didn't feel different. I felt equal, supported, and proud to be part of something bigger than myself. Sport builds confidence, creates opportunities, and gives people a voice to express themselves. When we play together, support each other, and believe in inclusion, we don't just change the game…we change lives."

Pierre Dejoux, President of Special Olympics France
"We warmly thank Special Olympics International for its trust, and all event stakeholders for their support. Ever since the Rugby World Cup 2023 and the Olympic and Paralympic Games of Paris 2024, France has really become a preferred destination for global sporting events. As part of the legacy from the Paralympics Games Paris 2024, the Unified Football World Cup Paris 2026 is helping establish the country as a key destination for inclusive sport."

Lilian Thuram, International Footballer and one of the earliest supporters of the Unified Football World Cup Paris 2026 Bid
"Football is much more than a game; it teaches people to play and live together, embracing their differences and building mutual respect. Inclusivity is one of the core values of sport, and it helped me construct myself as a player and as a man. That is why I am incredibly proud to support Special Olympics France in bringing the Unified Football World Cup to Paris. This event will leave a long-lasting legacy and will benefit thousands of men and women living with intellectual disabilities."

Jacques Rivoal, Chair of the Paris 2026 Local Organizing Committee
"This major event will help Special Olympics France toward its goal to bring together public authorities, sport entities, and private partners to build a more inclusive society in France."

Section 4: An exclusive family of partners

The Special Olympics Unified Football World Cup Paris 2026 is supported by public and private partners.

THE SPECIAL OLYMPICS UNIFIED FOOTBALL WORLD CUP PARIS 2026 IS MADE POSSIBLE BY THE SUPPORT OF

GOUVERNEMENT
Liberté
Egalité
Fraternité

PARIS

Métropole du Grand Paris

Région ÎledeFrance

ars

FFF

PARIS FC

Lions Clubs International FOUNDATION

PREMIUM PARTNER

Deloitte.

FIRST OFFICIAL PARTNER

Coca-Cola

OFFICIAL PARTNER

sanofi

HEALTH OFFICIAL PARTNER

saur

OFFICIAL PARTNER

invivo

OTIS

UNITED

OFFICIAL SUPPORTERS

WITH THE INVOLVEMENT OF

Fédération Française du Sport Adapté ÎLE-DE-FRANCE

CITÉ INTERNATIONALE UNIVERSITAIRE DE PARIS

ÎledeFrance mobilités

VIDEO CREDITS

SPECIAL OLYMPICS INTERNATIONAL - SPECIAL OLYMPICS FRANCE
VILLE DE PARIS - ATOUT FRANCE
MOTION ARRAY

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The French Central Government,
Marina Ferrari, Minister of Sports, Youth, and Community Life
"The Paris 2024 Olympic and Paralympic Games marked a historic turning point for para-sport in France. They transformed perceptions, strengthened the visibility of athletes with disabilities, and sparked an unprecedented momentum for participation of para-sports throughout the territory. This legacy carries a responsibility. Access to sport remains far too unequal for many people with disabilities. It is our collective duty to build on this momentum and turn inclusion through sport into a tangible reality for everyone. Sport is a formidable driver of empowerment, health, social connection, and active citizenship. It is an issue of general interest. With the recent publication of the *National Sport and Disability Strategy 2030*, the French Government is taking responsibility to ensure that sport participation, facilities, and events are fully accessible across the country, while supporting all stakeholders involved. This strategy embodies a strong ambition: to place people with disabilities at the heart of sports policies and to build a more inclusive society through sport. The Special Olympics Unified Football World Cup Paris 2026 is an unmissable event. By bringing together athletes with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team, it creates a shared and unified sport. Paris is preparing to become the world capital of unified football; we are very proud to host this event and to support Special Olympics France in its ambition."

The Greater Paris Authority
Patrick Ollier, Greater Paris Authority
"Building on the momentum of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, the Greater Paris Metropolis continues its commitment to a unifying and inclusive sports legacy by supporting the organization of the Special Olympics Unified Football World Cup 2026, hosted for the first time in France! This event is a unique opportunity to promote inclusion through sport at the heart of the Metropolis, raise awareness on the need of people with disabilities, and extend this impact across its 130 municipalities, especially among the youth."

Île-de-France Region Authority
Pierre Deniziot, Special Delegate for Inclusion, Disability and Accessibility, in charge of "Metro for All"
"The Olympic and Paralympic games provided a formidable opportunity to showcase para-athletes and introduce the public to lesser-known sport such as blind football and boccia. Above all, they helped change perceptions of disability. The Games left Île-de-France with a remarkable legacy, exemplified by the Prisme in Bobigny, which has become a leading hub for inclusive sport. Hosting the third edition of the Unified Football World Cup in Île-de-France demonstrates both the enthusiasm and the lasting impact of the momentum generated by the Paralympic Games."

Île-de-France Adapted Sports League
Marc Bellitto, President
"The Île-de-France Adapted Sports League stands alongside Special Olympics France and its partners. Building on the legacy of the Paris 2024 Games, the 2026 Unified Football World Cup reflects the complementarity of our approaches, all converging toward a single goal: a society in which everyone is valued and has the same opportunities to grow and fulfill their potential.
As a parent of a young Paralympic athlete, I witness daily the benefits of sport across all areas of his development—autonomy, communication, health, and more. It is crucial that all people living with intellectual disabilities can experience the benefits of inclusive adapted sport, just as my son Arthur does."

Île-de-France (ARS) Regional Health Agency
Denis Robin, General Director
"After supporting Paralympics athletes in their preparations for the Paris 2024 Paralympic Games, our support for the Unified Football World Cup Special Olympics Paris 2026 is further proof, if any was needed, that our commitment is both enduring and genuine. One of our core missions is to coordinate and organize the support solutions for people with disabilities, from childhood into adult life. It was therefore only natural for us to continue our commitment to sport for people with disabilities and to help raise awareness among all residents of the Île-de-France region. We very much look forward to coming together next July to cheer on the teams competing in the Special Olympics Unified Football World Cup Paris 2026."

The French Football Federation (FFF)
Philippe Diallo, President
"While football is, above all, a game—and must remain so—it cannot be viewed solely through the lens of performance or results. Football is much more than a sport. In every village, every neighborhood, every school, it is a powerful bond that brings people together, transcends differences, and gives everyone a place, regardless of their background, origin, or circumstances.
Today more than ever, football reflects our society and, as such, carries a responsibility: to serve as a vehicle for inclusion, social cohesion, accessibility, equality, solidarity, and respect.

As France's leading sports federation, we have a responsibility to ensure access to football for the largest number of people, without distinction.

That is why, over the past several years, we have undertaken a profound evolution of our federation's strategy, placing inclusion, the fight against all forms of discrimination, and accessibility at the heart of our action.

This commitment is expressed through concrete programs, the mobilization of our network, and strengthened dialogue with all stakeholders engaged on these

issues. We have further reinforced our long-standing partnerships with the French Federation of Handisport (2012) and the French Adapted Sports Federation (2002), and implemented a plan to enrich and diversify our practices to facilitate the inclusion of those who are distant from sports and playing fields. Accessibility is not optional; it is a right.

The exchanges taking place today around Unified Football and the initiatives led by Special Olympics fully align with this dynamic. They demonstrate our commitment to building meaningful and sustainable cooperation for the benefit of all participants.

By linking football with inclusion, our Federation fully embraces its role as an actor for the public good. We promote a football that is demanding in performance but also exemplary in its values, faithful to its mission, and committed to serving society."

Paris FC
Pierre Ferracci, President

"For Paris FC, competition and inclusion are not opposed goals; they are complementary: true performance is achieved when no one is left on the sidelines. At Paris FC, linking football with inclusion is a daily reality that is expressed through three key commitments:

1. Diversity as a requirement
2. Accessibility as a principle and inclusion as a commitment
3. Training as a responsibility"

Lions Clubs International Foundation
Fabrício Oliveira, Chairperson
"By supporting the Special Olympics Unified Football World Cup Paris 2026, we demonstrate the power that comes from creating a global stage where every athlete, regardless of ability, has the chance to reach their full potential and motivate all of us to do the same. Lions International and Lions volunteers throughout the world salute the efforts of the athletes, coaches and families that will make Paris an unforgettable display of inclusion, service and unity."

Lions Clubs International Foundation, France
Laurence Mercadal, President of the Counsel of Governors
"For the Lions, sport has never been just about performance; above all, it is a space where everyone should be able to find their place. From the very beginning, the Lions have embraced a committed vision: one in which sport is accessible, human, and unified. Every initiative aims to turn sport into a tool for social inclusion, where engagement, solidarity, and respect take precedence over selection. For the Lions, the greatest achievement is not merely winning a match but giving everyone the

chance to step onto the field, take risks, improve, and be part of a team. The Lions will proudly be the first supporters of the Unified Football World Cup."

Nike
Vanessa Garcia-Brito, Vice-President and Chief Impact Officer
"Nike's partnership with Special Olympics International is setting a new standard for inclusive formation of coaches and expanding access to sport through the Special Olympics Unified Sports program." said Vanessa Garcia-Brito, Vice-President and Chief Impact Officer at NIKE. "It is a powerful example of how we are creating the future of youth sport: a future where sport is accessible, fun and inclusive for all kids. Through the Special Olympics Unified Sports program, Nike is helping to develop coach training by providing the tools needed to support athletes of all levels and abilities. We are thrilled to see this commitment come to life at the Special Olympics Unified Football World Cup, where 500 volunteers, 200 Special Olympics staff members, and Unified football athletes from 24 nations will come together around competition, camaraderie, and a shared sense of community."

The Coca-Cola Company, France
Fanny Happiette, Marketing Director
"Special Olympics, much like Coca-Cola, helps bring people together through sports, inclusivity and celebration. We're proud to continue supporting this important organization, while cheering on every athlete courageously pursuing their dream."

Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris
Jean-Marc Sauvé, President
"Founded in 1925, in the aftermath of the First World War, the *Cité Internationale Universitaire de Paris* was born from a humanist vision: to show that living together in diversity is essential to building long lasting peace. For a century, it has placed tolerance, solidarity, and intercultural dialogue at the heart of its mission.
From the very beginning, sport has held a special place within this mission, with dedicated facilities including football, rugby, tennis, swimming, dojo, dance studio and many more. Hosting the Special Olympics delegations from all around the world extends this ideal and serves as a powerful reminder that diversity is a strength and fraternity an imperative."

Bertrand Boisselier, Chairman of the Board and President of the Deloitte Foundation

"Alongside athletes, families, volunteers, and committed organizations, we humbly contribute to building a more inclusive society. This commitment, fully aligned with our values, highlights that diversity of talents and backgrounds is a fundamental asset for both society and the economy."

Toby Enqvist, United Airlines Chief Operating Officer and Special Olympics Board Member

"Creating a sense of belonging—where acceptance and appreciation of everyone is the norm—is a core value of United Airlines. As a Global Partner of Special Olympics since 2018, we are proud to support our employees and athletes with intellectual disabilities alike through our Special Olympics Service Ambassador program, and honored to sponsor the Special Olympics Unified Football World Cup this July in Paris."

Section 5: Contacts médias/Media contacts

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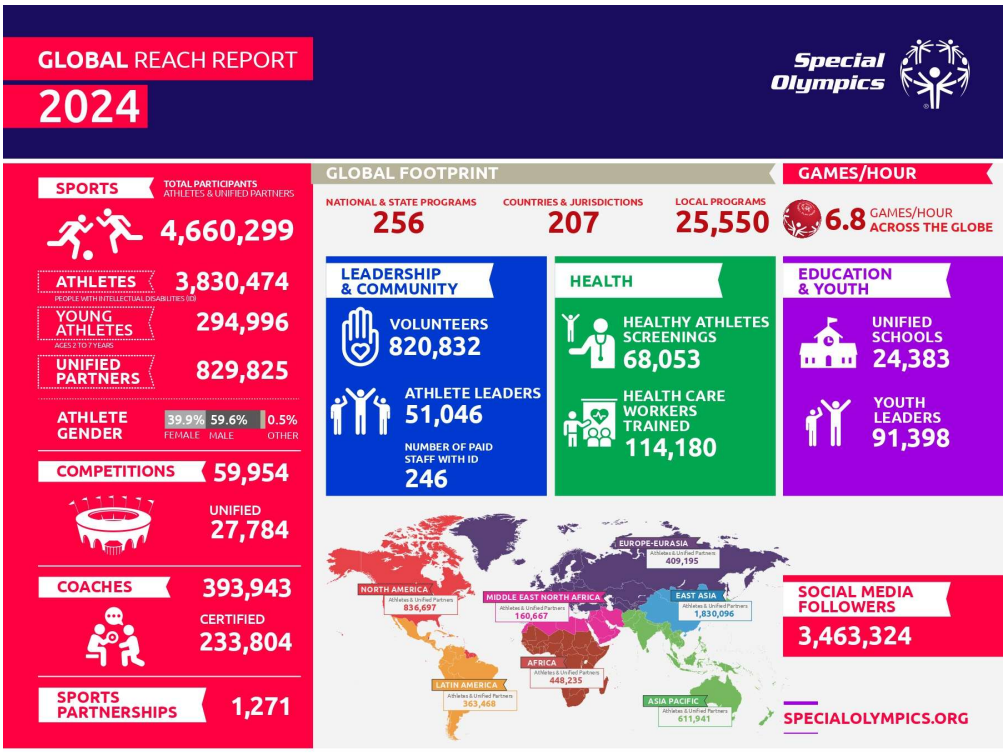
Annexes:


GLOBAL REACH REPORT
2024
Special Olympics
SPORTS
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS ATHLETES & UNIFIED PARTNERS
4,660,299
ATHLETES
PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES (ID)
3,830,474
YOUNG ATHLETES
AGES 2 TO 7 YEARS
294,996
UNIFIED PARTNERS
829,825
ATHLETE GENDER
39.9% FEMALE
59.6% MALE
0.5% OTHER
COMPETITIONS
59,954
UNIFIED
27,784
COACHES
393,943
CERTIFIED
233,804
SPORTS PARTNERSHIPS
1,271
GLOBAL FOOTPRINT
NATIONAL & STATE PROGRAMS
256
COUNTRIES & JURISDICTIONS
207
LOCAL PROGRAMS
25,550
GAMES/HOUR
6.8 GAMES/HOUR ACROSS THE GLOBE
LEADERSHIP & COMMUNITY
VOLUNTEERS
820,832
ATHLETE LEADERS
51,046
NUMBER OF PAID STAFF WITH ID
246
HEALTH
HEALTHY ATHLETES SCREENINGS
68,053
HEALTH CARE WORKERS TRAINED
114,180
EDUCATION & YOUTH
UNIFIED SCHOOLS
24,383
YOUTH LEADERS
91,398
EUROPE-EURASIA
Athletes & Unified Partners
409,195
NORTH AMERICA
Athletes & Unified Partners
836,697
MIDDLE EAST NORTH AFRICA
Athletes & Unified Partners
160,667
EAST ASIA
Athletes & Unified Partners
1,830,096
AFRICA
Athletes & Unified Partners
448,235
LATIN AMERICA
Athletes & Unified Partners
363,468
ASIA PACIFIC
Athletes & Unified Partners
611,941
SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWERS
3,463,324
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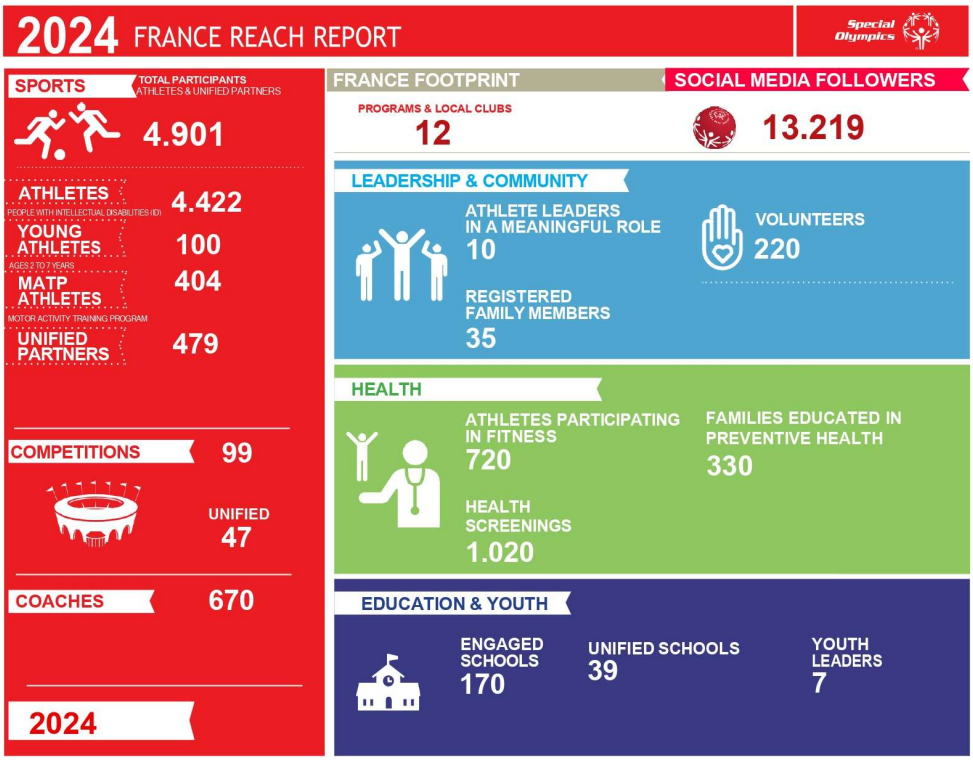
2024 FRANCE REACH REPORT
Special Olympics
SPORTS
TOTAL PARTICIPANTS ATHLETES & UNIFIED PARTNERS
4.901
ATHLETES
PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES (ID)
4.422
YOUNG ATHLETES
AGES 2 TO 7 YEARS
100
MATP ATHLETES
MOTOR ACTIVITY TRAINING PROGRAM
404
UNIFIED PARTNERS
479
COMPETITIONS
99
UNIFIED
47
COACHES
670
2024
FRANCE FOOTPRINT
PROGRAMS & LOCAL CLUBS
12
SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWERS
13.219
LEADERSHIP & COMMUNITY
ATHLETE LEADERS IN A MEANINGFUL ROLE
10
REGISTERED FAMILY MEMBERS
35
VOLUNTEERS
220
HEALTH
ATHLETES PARTICIPATING IN FITNESS
720
HEALTH SCREENINGS
1.020
FAMILIES EDUCATED IN PREVENTIVE HEALTH
330
EDUCATION & YOUTH
ENGAGED SCHOOLS
170
UNIFIED SCHOOLS
39
YOUTH LEADERS
7