

Fitness Captains

A Fitness Captain is an athlete leadership role on a sports team to lead the team in activities related to fitness and healthy habits. Fitness Captains have a passion for fitness, exercise, and healthy behaviors and can bring this mindset to their teammates.

Background

People with intellectual disabilities (ID) are two times more likely to be obese, have heart disease,¹ and die 16 years earlier than their age related peers.² Physical activity can decrease risks for obesity, heart disease, and all-cause mortality; however, only about 10% of people with ID meet the World Health Organization's guidelines for physical activity.^{3,4} For our athletes to be fit, they must practice healthy habits year-round and lifelong. Behavior change takes time and support.

Regularly integrating fitness training and health education within sports practice and competition can build a culture that emphasizes health and fitness. Unfortunately, barriers such as lack of fitness opportunities, volunteer capacity, and inadequate knowledge and confidence of sports coaches pose challenges to improving fitness levels. Therefore, additional support is needed to increase fitness through sport and competition.



"I feel good to lead my teammates in team warm-ups, get them motivated and warmed up. **I like to help them feel good and give ideas for a healthy lifestyle and lead by example.** I like to lead. I hope to get my teammates to improve at least one thing about their health. **My job as Fitness Captain is very important.**"⁵

Vince Egan, Special Olympics Colorado

The Fitness Captain program was created by Special Olympics Colorado (SOCO) in 2018. "We were finding that while weekly practice was incredibly helpful for athletes to develop the sports skills required to compete, **there was not enough emphasis being placed on building overall fitness and developing healthy habits.** Thus, the Fitness Captain program was created as a way

to (1) provide SOCO athletes with more leadership opportunities on and off the field, (2) remove some of the responsibilities placed upon the coach during the weekly training sessions and (3) to increase the overall health and fitness of athletes," said SOCO CEO, Megan Scremin.

The program began with 39 athletes and has since grown to 121 Fitness Captains. Today, of 702 Colorado teams, nearly 21% have Fitness Captains⁵. Eighty-nine percent of Fitness Captains say they are leading warm-ups and stretches for their teams, and 71% report that they utilize the Fit 5 program⁵. SOCO coach Marni McNeese says, "**Fitness Captains are a great asset to the teams we coach** as they allow us as coaches to get practice-ready as they are leading warm-ups. They are a great support to the athletes that might need a little one-on-one. They are great helpers in reminding athletes of hydration and appropriate fuel for competitions, and **they are great advocates when it comes to helping us as coaches understand the athletes better and what their goals are.**"

The Fitness Captain program has already been adopted by three other states. Special Olympics New Mexico said that "**the Fitness Captain program provides us an opportunity to train new athlete leaders who might not usually be called on, and take a grassroots approach to programming.**" Often, athletes who need fitness and health interventions the most are the most difficult to reach. Fitness Captains is an attractive model of athlete leadership given the clearly defined responsibilities and pathway for activation for Programs that want to extend their health and fitness programming to all athletes.

Vision

Fitness Captains will encourage and empower fellow athletes to be healthy and fit on all Special Olympics teams.

Using their leadership skills and fitness knowledge, Fitness Captains will ensure each sports practice is a key setting for fitness programming implementation.

Fitness Captains can influence the norms of their team, which in turn, can impact behavior. Teams that have Fitness Captains will:

- Complete appropriate warm-up and cool-down at each practice or training session
- Learn health education tips or lessons
- Be supported to practice healthy behaviors and encouraged to participate in other health/fitness programming

Special Olympics Roles modules are designed to provide athletes with an overview of what to expect from each of the leadership roles and learn knowledge and skills associated with that role. **Fitness Captains will be a role within Sport Leaders**, supporting athletes as they reach their maximum potential. The Fitness Captain module will provide athletes with information that will help them introduce fitness into their sports program. It will include content on leadership in fitness, fitness components, the benefits of fitness, how to lead sport-specific warm-ups and cool-downs, and sharing health education tips.

The Fitness Captain role has clearly defined responsibilities, providing opportunity for athletes to grow their leadership skills and further explore their interests without the requirement of a larger commitment. Their role in Special Olympics may change over time depending on their interests, goals, and time commitments. For example, one pathway that Fitness Captains can take in their journey is completing additional trainings to become a Sports Coach or Health Messenger. In the case of SOCO Fitness Captain James Kropp, **“I have wanted to work in the fitness industry for a while now. Being a Fitness Captain is a step toward that goal. I look forward to completing my Athlete Leadership Programs University (ALPs U): Health and Fitness training and continuing to work with our athletes in the area of fitness and nutrition.”**⁵



Alignment with Health Messengers

Currently, fitness is one component of the Health Messenger training program. This training provides a high-level overview of fitness; however, fitness as relates to the sports experience is not included. After completing the Health Messenger training, Health Messengers can choose one focus area to activate their role. There is no guarantee they will choose fitness or have a role on the field of play. In the 2021 Health Impact Grant final report, **21% of Program respondents across all Regions indicated Health Messengers lead health and fitness in a sports practice**⁶. Health Messengers are not Fitness Captains, but they are invited to complete this core module.

Alternatively, the Fitness Captain program may be a steppingstone to becoming a Health Messenger. Fitness Captains may feel inspired and ready to take on other roles in Health, such as advocating for healthcare providers and governments to adopt inclusive policies.

Fitness Captain Progression

In addition to Special Olympics Roles, there are other pathways of progression for Fitness Captains. Athletes must attend one training each year to stay active as a Fitness Captain. However, in each year of training the Fitness Captains are provided with new skills, roles and responsibilities, as determined by the Program. In SOCO, Fitness Captains can work towards Regional Fitness Captain status using the progressive approach below:

- **Second Year:** Refresher training on delivering warm-ups and health education; content-specific training for health education; what to do when there are multiple Fitness Captains on one team; what to do if your coach isn't supportive of Fitness Captains
- **Third Year:** Content-specific training for health education; help recruit new Fitness Captains
- **Regional Fitness Captains:** Help lead a First-Year Fitness Captain Training; attend the Health and Fitness ALPs U track and possibly participate in ALPs U as "teachers" once they complete the Health and Fitness track

Fitness Captains Improve Health and Fitness

Fitness Captains follow a **peer-led programming** model. Special Olympics athletes will have the opportunity to learn health-related information from a teammate who shares their experiences as a person with ID. In a study examining the effectiveness of a peer-led health promotion program for people with ID, **peer participants had significant changes in physical activity and hydration knowledge, social supports, and total health behaviors**⁷. Similarly, peer leaders had significant changes in physical activity and hydration knowledge. Both groups reported high levels of satisfaction⁷. Fitness Captains will work closely with their coaches to help ensure health and fitness is a key component of the sports experience.



Fitness Captains will use their leadership and communication skills to improve the health and fitness of their teammates by teaching healthy habits that improve fitness and sports performance. This will:

- Reduce injury and improve fitness by participating in appropriate warm-up and cool-down at every practice
- Increase knowledge of health topics
- Increase awareness of personal health habits
- Improve health behaviors in physical activity, nutrition, and hydration

Fitness Captains are expected to share a health education tip or lesson at each training session. They will also lead by example during all points of the sports experience.

Fitness Captains Support a Healthy and Safe Sports Experience

Fitness is an important element of sport. **Proper sports training, physical conditioning, and leading a healthy, active lifestyle can help athletes reduce risk of injury, recover more quickly, and increase sports performance.** Additionally, a focus on fitness through the lens of sport can help drive positive daily choices that support improvement in overall health and wellbeing.

Special Olympics coaches promote and value health and fitness but may benefit from additional support to do so. Fitness Captains can take on the responsibility of leading warm-ups and cool-downs. A warm-up helps athletes to reach a state of physical and mental readiness. When athletes prepare both the body and the mind, they are less likely to suffer an injury and will perform better at each practice, training, and competition. **Dynamic warm-ups are associated with greater performance enhancement and protection against muscle strains⁸.**

Each practice or competition should also end with a cool-down. A good cool-down allows the body to gradually return to a state of rest and increases the rate of recovery from exercise.



It is important to note that Fitness Captains are not sports coaches. A sport coach teaches sport specific skills, strategies, and tactics through a variety of drills, games, and activities. The sport coach leads every practice and is responsible for coordinating the different parts of the session. The Fitness Captain will work closely with the coach to decide what activities are most appropriate for the warm-up and cool down for each session.

Expected Outcomes

Fitness Captains directly support two Key Strategies of the **2021-2024 Special Olympics Global Strategic Plan⁹:**

- S1. Improve Quality and Reach of Local Programming
- S2. Empower Athlete Leaders and Other Change-Makers

This will be made possible through these expected outcomes:

- Improved sport performance
- Increased health behaviors
- Increased physical activity during and outside of practices
- Increased health promotion opportunities for athletes
- Increased number of Fitness Captains

Next Steps

By the end of 2024, we will train 750 Fitness Captains across 7 Special Olympics Regions. Over the next year, the following steps will be taken to be successful:

- **Ongoing:** Collaboration with SOCO to learn best practices, successes and challenges
- **Summer 2022 – Winter 2022:** Develop the Fitness Captain Toolkit
- **Spring 2023:** Fitness Captain pilot launches in selected Programs across Regions
- **Summer 2023:** Launch Fitness Captains globally



References

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