



Bringing athletes with and without intellectual disabilities together to end bullying, reduce stigma, and build friendships.

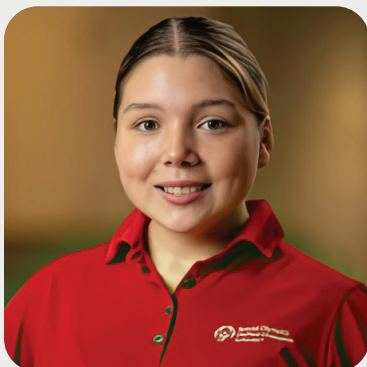
You may not have heard the term “Unified Sports” before, but it’s central to Special Olympics’ mission.

Simply put, Unified Sports puts people with and without intellectual disabilities on the same teams. It was inspired by a simple principle: training together and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding.

With sports as the foundation, this model offers a unique combination of effective activities that equip young people with tools and training to create sports, classroom, and school climates of acceptance. As a result, students with disabilities feel welcome and are routinely included in, and feel a part of, all activities, opportunities, and functions.

Programs are woven into the fabric of the school and are fundamental to ending stigma and bullying. It’s vitally important to encourage all students of all abilities to be champions for inclusion.

Here are two of their stories:



Izzy McKamey
Special Olympics Washington Youth Ambassador Alumni

My name is Izzy, and I love any opportunity that will enhance my understanding of how I can be a well-rounded change maker in our communities. Life has offered disguised blessings to me that have given me an insightful perspective of life beyond my own struggles.

I joined Special Olympics just a few years ago. Throughout my story with Special Olympics, I have been a part of my schools Unified program and have played both seasons of unified soccer and basketball. I attended 2 summits my first year and organized my first field day.

Prior to combining Unified with our school field day, I volunteered at a neighboring elementary school to promote inclusion and Unified Sports. Our club worked really hard on that day to create an event that was geared toward encouraging youth to combat stigmas that can be really hurtful and impact someone’s perception of what it means to have inclusion in our communities. Being a part of this mission means the world to me.



Rylynn Zanon

Special Olympics Minnesota Youth Ambassador Alumni

My name is Rylynn. I graduated from Stillwater Area High School last year. I have been a part of Special Olympic Minnesota for 7 years. I first got involved with Unified Sports in my freshman year of high school when our unified physical education teacher asked me to join. I took our unified gym class, bowled with the Special Olympics Minnesota Lumberjacks, and played unified basketball.

Ice hockey is my other passion. Because my dad was a professional NHL player, I basically grew up in hockey rinks. However, it took me some time and practice before I was able to fully develop my hockey skills and glide down the ice with ease.

When I started going to the rink, I loved being there, but learning to skate was a bit more difficult for me than for most. Even finding the rights skates was a challenge.

But once I saw another friend play with the Minnesota Special Hockey Program, I immediately signed up and was hooked.

Now more than seven years later, I just received the USA Hockey 2024 Disabled Athlete of the Year Award at the 2024 USA Hockey President's Awards Dinner!

Now that I'm out of high school, I am continuing to play in the program with the NHL's Minnesota Wild. The league itself is incredible! It's open to anybody and everybody regardless of age and their abilities.

The friends I've made along the way playing hockey is my favorite thing. It's been pretty exciting to show other students what it takes to be a leader.

Rylynn's contributions are championed by her mentor, Paula Harrison:

"Rylynn has served in many leadership roles, from high school, Special Olympics Minnesota, and now through her university experiences and as a paraprofessional in our school district continuing to make a difference in the community. We are truly blessed to have her be part of our lives as we work together to create a truly inclusive community."

