

SPECIAL OLYMPICS

Global Athletics Development Strategy

2026 - 2031



**Special
Olympics**



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INTRODUCTION

Athletics is the most popular and widely practiced sport across the Special Olympics movement. First featured at the inaugural Special Olympics World Games in Chicago in 1968 at Soldier Field, the sport has since grown to include more than 1.7 million athletes and Unified partners, with over 8,000 competitions held annually around the world. Athletics offers exceptional diversity, from track to field events, sprints to long-distance races, and a wide range of technical skills, creating inclusive opportunities for every athlete to train, compete, and experience the transformative power of sport.



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A MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIRMAN

“Athletics has been at the heart of Special Olympics since the very beginning. When my mother, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, launched this movement, she believed that the power of sport could open doors to dignity, belonging, and human potential. For more than five decades, Athletics has embodied that belief. It is our most globally practiced sport, and it continues to offer athletes of all abilities the chance to discover their strength, challenge expectations, and experience the joy of achievement.”

This Global Development Plan represents our shared commitment to ensuring that Athletics grows with intention, quality, and purpose. It builds on the leadership of our Programs, the energy of our coaches, and, most importantly, the triumphs of our athletes. Together, we will expand access, elevate standards, and ensure that every athlete, regardless of geography or circumstance, can pursue their personal best.”

- Dr. Timothy Shriver, Chairman, Special Olympics Inc.

ATHLETICS IN NUMBERS



1,406,440
ATHLETES



101,393
COACHES



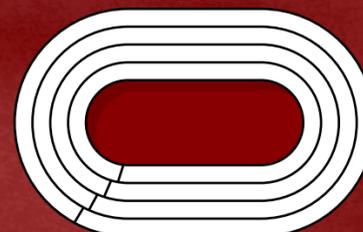
325,176
UNIFIED PARTNERS



56,879
CERTIFIED COACHES



242
MEMBER PROGRAMS



8000+
COMPETITIONS ANNUALLY



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IMPLEMENTATION PARTNERS

Special Olympics



**SPECIAL OLYMPICS
REGIONAL OFFICES
AND NATIONAL/
STATE MEMBER
PROGRAMS**



**INTERNATIONAL,
REGIONAL, AND
NATIONAL
ATHLETICS
GOVERNING
BODIES**



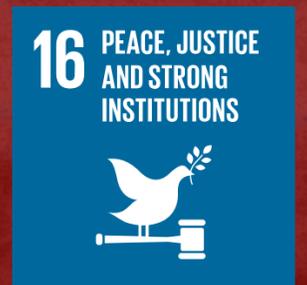
**FUNDING
PARTNERS**



STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT

The Global Athletics Development Strategy is a key driver of Special Olympics' Global Strategic Plan, translating organizational priorities into focused, sport-specific action. As one of the most accessible and scalable sports, athletics plays a critical role in advancing inclusion, participation, and community well-being worldwide.

The strategy also contributes to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, including those related to health and well-being, reduced inequalities, and inclusive communities.



STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT

Through its strategic pillars, the Athletics Development Strategy directly supports the achievement of the two primary goals of the Special Olympics Global Strategic Plan:

- **Goal A:** Improve local sports participation and well-being to strengthen communities
- **Goal B:** Remove barriers to inclusion and expand reach through digital technology

Together, these alignments position athletics as a foundational sport driving measurable impact across the Special Olympics movement.





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KEY IMPACT AREAS



PARTICIPATION & DEVELOPMENT

Impact Area	Strategy Initiative	Key Performance Indicator
Athlete Participation & Coach Development	Special Olympics Inc. Athletics Development Grants	All Special Olympics accredited programs offer Athletics
	Global Growth	<p>Athletics continues as most popular participation sport within Special Olympics</p> <p>Grow global participation to over 2,000,000 athletes and Unified partners</p> <p>Increase participation of Young & Junior Athletes through Kids Athletics</p> <p>Develop and implement unique frameworks to target</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase participation of Young & Junior Athletes through Kids Athletics • Masters Pathway • Increased participation in middle-distance and long-distance events, as well as field events <p>Establish a mechanism to track participation by event</p>
	Coach Education	<p>Identify best model of coach development delivery for certification with World Athletics</p> <p>Establish a system to track federation certified coaches</p> <p>Increase the number of certified Athletics coaches to 65,410 worldwide</p> <p>Update and reimagine Special Olympics Athletics Coaching Guide</p>
Unified	Unified Team Athletics	Pilot Unified Team Athletics in 3 new Special Olympics programs
Fitness	Fitness Captains	<p>Train 500 athletics athletes to serve as Fitness Captains</p> <p>Fitness Captains are athletes on a sports team who lead the team in activities related to fitness and a healthy lifestyle. Teams that have Fitness Captains will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete safe and effective warm-up and cool-down routines • Learn health education tips or lessons • Be supported to practice healthy behaviors and encouraged to participate in additional health/fitness programming

COMPETITION & EVENTS

Impact Area	Strategy Initiative	Key Performance Indicator
World	Special Olympics World Games 2027 & 2031	Athletics included as an official sport at the 2027 and 2031 Special Olympics World Games with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 800+ athletes participating • Representation from 170+ countries
	Special Olympics World Games Coaching Standards	2027 (Santiago): Establish baseline of Head Coaches who hold Athletics Coaching Standards certification requirement 2031: 100% of Head Coaches hold Coaching Standards certification requirement
	Inclusive Competition	A Special Olympics division is added to 2-3 global athletics competitions
Regional	Regional Competitions	Host regional Special Olympics athletics competitions in all 7 Special Olympics regions
National & Local	National & Local Competitions	All accredited programs offering athletics participation, offer a competition opportunity and environment
		10,000+ athletics competitions taking place annually
		Develop and publish a standardized guide for delivering local program-level Athletics competitions, ensuring accessibility, scalability, and alignment with global best practices
Technical	Sport Impact Standards	Disseminate and promote understanding of Special Olympics Athletics Sport Impact Standards across all levels Publish the standards in all SOI official languages
	Technical Delegate	Deliver Technical Delegate training workshop with representation from all 7 Special Olympics regions
	Training of Officials with Intellectual and/or Development Disabilities (IDD)	Provide training for officials with IDD, aiming for a minimum of five to serve at the Special Olympics World Games 2031.
Sport Rules	Special Olympics Athletics Rules	Update Special Olympics athletics rules to align with World Athletics Rules

PARTNERSHIPS

Impact Area	Strategy Initiative	Key Performance Indicator
Global	Global Development	<p>Formalize partnership between Special Olympics and the global athletics ecosystem</p> <p>Publish and implement a Global Athletics Development Strategy</p>
Regional	Regional Collaboration	<p>Formalize a partnership between 3 Athletics regional governing bodies and Special Olympics regions</p> <p>Athletics as a priority sport in all 7 Special Olympics regions</p>
National & Local	Strengthening National and Local Partnerships	<p>Establish 110 partnerships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 60 Level 3 Partnerships • 30 Level 2 Partnerships • 20 Level 1 Partnerships <p>Partnerships to focus on priority areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coach Education & Training • Access to Competition • Access to Training Venues • Officials Training • International Competition Support
	Club Model	Publish a comprehensive guide for integration of Special Olympics athletics into traditional club settings

COMMUNICATIONS

Impact Area	Strategy Initiative	Key Performance Indicator
Articles, Publications & Storytelling	Media & Editorial Coverage	<p>Publish dedicated content about athletics on Special Olympics website</p> <p>Secure features in targeted sports and development media outlets (e.g., AIPS, Inside the Games, Around the Rings)</p>
	Campaign “Meet the Heroes”	Publish athletics athlete story as a part of Special Olympics’ wider “Meet the Heroes” campaign
	Coverage of Special Olympics World Games	Ensure extensive communications and media coverage of Special Olympics athletes at World Games, and maintained momentum between quadrennial’s
Social Media	Social Media Activation Plan	Publish quarterly athletics content to engage social media audiences across Instagram, TikTok, X, Facebook and LinkedIn
Resources	Communications Toolkit	<p>Develop one comprehensive communications toolkit for global, regional, and national stakeholders, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fact sheet • Key messages • Sample Q&A • Visual assets (images, videos, logos) • Suggested hashtags • Sample social media captions and promotional content
	Website Resource Hub	Fully update the Special Olympics Athletics Resource Page with all relevant training, competition, coaching, and storytelling materials
Ambassadors	Athlete and Sport Ambassador Program	<p>Identify and activate Special Olympics athletics athletes as official ambassadors to promote inclusion and athletics globally</p> <p>Engage existing Athletics athlete(s) that serve as Special Olympics Global Ambassador</p>

Contact Information

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