**Divisioning**

The fundamental difference between Special Olympics competitions and those of other sports organizations is that athletes of all ability levels are encouraged to participate, and every athlete is recognized for his/her performance. Competitions are structured so that athletes compete with other athletes of similar ability in equitable divisions.

**Divisioning in Special Olympics Sports**

Historically, Special Olympics has suggested that all divisions be created so that the variance between the highest and lowest scores within that division does not differ by more than 15 percent. This 15 percent statement is not a rule but should be used as a guideline for establishing equitable divisions when the number of athletes competing is appropriate. Every event in the Special Olympics World Games is a final, for which medals (places 1-3) and ribbons (placed 4-8) will be awarded, with a minimum of three and a maximum of eight competitors. Athletes in every sport and event are grouped by age, gender, and ability, giving everyone a reasonable chance to win. This idea of equal ability groupings is the foundation for competition in Special Olympics. All athletes are given an equal chance to participate, perform, and be recognized for doing their best by their teammates, family, friends, and fans.

**Responsibilities of the Athletes**

As we mentioned earlier, sportsmanship is important in developing a well-rounded athlete. Athletes are expected to follow the Special Olympics Official Sport Rules and the Athlete's Code of Conduct. Athletes who break the rules may be disqualified from further participation.

Athletes are also expected to give maximum effort when competing. This is the only way the divisioning process can work as it was intended. Athletes who do not participate honestly and with maximum effort in all preliminary trials and/or finals violate the true spirit of competition and may even be disqualified from competition.

# Responsibilities of the Coach

Coaches have an important role in an athlete's life. Next to family members, coaches interact more with athletes than anyone. In many instances, coaches become like family. Therefore, coaches must place the health and safety of Special Olympics athletes above all else. They too must follow the Official Sport Rules and the Coaches Code of Conduct.

Coaches are also critical in helping competition management teams make divisioning work. Divisioning works best when coaches submit preliminary scores. This helps athletes get into the proper division as well as gain additional competition experience.

# How Divisioning is Implemented

An athlete's ability is the primary factor in divisioning Special Olympics competitions. The ability of an athlete or team is determined by an entry score from a prior competition or the result of a seeding round or preliminary event at the competition itself. Other factors that are significant in establishing competitive divisions are age and sex.

Ideally, competition is enhanced when each division accommodates 3-8 competitors or teams of similar ability. In some cases, the number of athletes or teams within a competition will be insufficient to achieve this goal. The following describes the sequential process for creating equitable divisions.