

# Fitness Coach Activation Guide



## Introduction

Fitness is a key element of a quality sports experience in Special Olympics (SO). When fitness is intentionally integrated into sports training and competition, athletes are better supported in their performance, health, and overall wellbeing. This Guide introduces the Fitness Coach role and supports both potential Fitness Coaches and those working with them.

## Why Fitness Matters

Many Special Olympics athletes face health challenges that can affect both performance and long-term wellbeing. Athletes are more likely to experience obesity, be less physically active, and face higher risks for health conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes. Some athletes may also have challenges with balance, coordination, and fine motor skills. These realities highlight the importance of supporting intentional fitness to help athletes move better, stay healthy, and safely enjoy sport.

## Fitness through Sport

**Special Olympics defines fitness as optimal health and performance through adequate physical activity, nutrition, and hydration.** Athletes achieve fitness by practicing healthy habits year-round and throughout their lifespan. The sport and competition setting provides an ideal opportunity to build a culture of fitness – one that emphasizes health both on and off the field of play. By regularly integrating fitness activities and health education into practices, competitions, and at-home routines, teams can support athletes in developing habits that benefit both performance and long-term wellbeing.

The **Fitness through Sport (FTS)** initiative expands the reach of health and fitness programming through a focus on three connected outcomes:

- **Performance:** endurance, speed, strength, flexibility
- **Health:** energy, healthy weight, fewer injuries
- **Wellbeing:** reduced disease risk, improved quality of life

## Why Fitness Coaches Matter in Fitness through Sport

Since Head Coaches already balance many responsibilities, supporting athletes' ongoing fitness can be challenging without the right resources or guidance – this is where Fitness Coaches come in.

**By partnering with Head Coaches, Fitness Coaches help bring Fitness through Sport to life, making fitness practical and achievable** through customized planning, targeted training, and individualized support. By promoting physical activity, nutrition, and hydration during practices and competitions, they help ensure athlete fitness is supported consistently and that the **Minimum Fit Practice Standards** are met. With a dedicated focus on fitness, Fitness Coaches strengthen athlete development and support both sport performance and lifelong health.

**Minimum "Fit" Practice Standards** define the components that should be included in every sports practice. These can be led by coaches, or other key leaders like Fitness Captains.

- 5-minute warm-up with dynamic stretches
- 5-minute cool-down with static stretches
- Conditioning integrated into practice
- Encouragement to be active and healthy outside of practice
- Focus on active practice
- Water breaks every 15-20 minutes
- Healthy foods encouraged at team functions



## The Fitness Coach Role

A Fitness Coach is a volunteer who partners with Head Coaches across one or more teams within a Special Olympics Program to integrate fitness activities and education into all phases of the sport experience.

Fitness Coaches provide a range of support during training sessions, between sessions, at competitions, and throughout the off-season. The specific role of a Fitness Coach will vary depending on their availability, interests, and education, and the fitness needs of athletes on a team.

The support of a Fitness Coach allows Head Coaches to focus on sport skills, strategy, and athlete development, knowing fitness is being supported with purpose and consistency. Fitness Coaches complement Head Coaches, and do not replace sport-specific coaching.

### REFLECTION

Having a clear idea of why you want to be a Fitness Coach and what you can offer will help you get off to the right start. **Why are you interested in becoming a Fitness Coach? How can you support athletes in health and fitness?**

## Eligibility for Becoming a Fitness Coach

Anyone who wants to work with Special Olympics athletes, has interest in health and fitness, and a willingness to learn can become a Fitness Coach! People who are well-suited to this role include:

- [Level 1 Sport Assistants](#)
- Certified health, fitness, or nutrition professionals, such as:
  - Personal Trainers
  - Group Exercise Instructors
  - Strength and Conditioning Coaches
  - Dietitians or Nutritionists
  - University or college students studying fitness-related fields (exercise science, kinesiology, adapted physical activity, nutrition, physical therapy, dietetics, etc.)
- Family members interested in supporting fitness
- Other general volunteers who are willing to learn

### REFLECTION

What category do you fall into? **What experience, skills and training do you already have that would help you in this role?**

## Main Areas of Support

Fitness Coaches work with Special Olympics Program Staff and the Head Coach to decide their focus in the following areas, based on their interest, availability, and expertise. It is recommended to support at least one role per area as a Fitness Coach.



Achieve the Minimum  
Fit Practice Standards



Promote Healthy  
Habits



Support Goal Setting

### Achieve the Minimum Fit Practice Standards

- Plan with the Head Coach to incorporate conditioning and [active practice](#) strategies in accordance with the [Minimum Fit Practice Standards](#).
- Focus on promoting fitness inside and outside of practice through integration of key physical fitness domains: strength, endurance, flexibility, balance, and agility.
- Support Fitness Captains to lead warm-ups and cool-downs. A Fitness Coach may be asked to lead warm-ups and cool-downs if they are available and there are no Fitness Captains on a team.
- Lead skill-based training that incorporates dynamic movement and injury prevention strategies.
- Design individual or team workouts for off-days or the off-season.

### Promote Healthy Habits

- Lead the [Fitness through Sport Playbook](#) lessons before or after training sessions.
- Share nutrition and hydration strategies for before, during, and after training or competition, utilizing resources like [Fit 5](#).
- Involve caregivers and families in supporting healthy eating and hydration routines.
- Offer or coordinate education sessions and resources on wellness topics throughout the season.
- Encourage the team to use the Special Olympics Fitness App to track healthy behavior goals, like water, fruit, and vegetable intake.

### Support Goal Setting

- Collaborate with the Head Coach to create team and individual health and fitness goals for the season.
- Conduct [fitness assessments](#) to support goal setting and tracking athlete progress throughout the season.
- Support athletes in monitoring progress towards these goals.
- Offer recommendations on ways to achieve their goals.

## REFLECTION

From the main areas of support, what roles are you most interested in? What roles do you feel you would like to learn more about? Consider the time commitment you can make and the frequency to which you can support the team.

## Working with the Coaching and Support Team

Building fit athletes on and off the field requires teamwork and ongoing support. As a Fitness Coach, you will have the opportunity to contribute to the unique make up of each team's leadership and support network. The most common group of leaders involved in a Special Olympics team may include (but is not limited to) Head Coaches, Coach Assistants (Assistant Coaches), Sport Assistants, and Fitness Captains.

The table below compares these common sport leadership roles. Together, they create a comprehensive support system for athlete development.

Head Coach	Coaching Assistant	Sport Assistant	Fitness Captain
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Responsible for planning the overall season and individual practices</li><li>Leads the planning and delivery of each practice</li><li>Develops and leads the coaching team</li><li>Supports the engagements of Fitness Captains and provision of sport leadership opportunities</li><li>Coaches sport skills and drills, adapting to the needs of each athlete</li><li>Addresses issues and challenges (e.g. behavior misconduct)</li><li>Holds sport-specific coaching certification</li></ul>	<p>Also known as Assistant Coach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Supports Head Coach with practice planning and delivery</li><li>Assists with technical and tactical coaching</li><li>Provides individualized coaching support to athletes (e.g. instruction, feedback, etc.)</li><li>May support with practice organization and logistics</li><li>Holds a SO Coach certification, and may progress to sport-specific coaching certifications</li></ul>	<p>A non-coaching sport volunteer who assists the coaching team.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Support with sport equipment set-up and clean up before and after practice</li><li>Support individual athletes when needed with demonstrations, 1:1 support, Fitness Captain support</li></ul>	<p>Special Olympics Athlete Leader who has completed Fitness Captain training</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Helps lead the warm-up and cool-down</li><li>Role model for their teammates</li><li>Shares a Health Tip at each practice</li></ul>

# Fitness Coach Training Pathway



## Step 1: Reach out to your local Special Olympics Program

- Connect with your local Special Olympics Program to inquire about becoming a Fitness Coach. For assistance with this, please email [fitness@specialolympics.org](mailto:fitness@specialolympics.org)
- Most Programs will have minimum requirements for volunteers, such as a background check, safeguarding, and an Introduction to Special Olympics course.

## Before meeting with your Special Olympics Program, be prepared to answer the following questions:

- How much time do you have to offer?
- How often you will attend training sessions (e.g. weekly, bi-weekly, periodic)
- Whether your support will be offered in-person, virtually, or a mix
- Involvement at competitions or special events (if applicable)
- Availability for brief check-ins outside of training sessions
- Are there specific sports or types of athletes (age, community, regional, etc.) that you are more interested in working with?
- Would you be interested in working with one or multiple teams?

## Step 2: Complete the Fitness Coach Training

Prior to becoming a Fitness Coach, complete these eLearning and in-person training modules:

- Complete the **Special Olympics [Fitness through Sport eLearning Plan](#)**, which includes three, 45-minute modules:
  - Fitness Training for the Sports Coach
  - Sports Nutrition for Coaches
  - Physical Activity for Sport Coaches
- Complete a **Fitness Coach training session with your SO Program**

If you are a fitness professional, it is also recommended that you complete the **Special Olympics [Inclusive Fitness eLearning Module](#)**.

**Fitness through Sport (Learning Plan)**  
Tools for coaches to support athlete performance across all sports, age groups, and ability levels.

Learning plan

[SHARE](#)

**Learning plan description**

The **Fitness through Sport Learning Plan** equips Special Olympics coaches with practical tools to enhance athlete health and performance across all sports, age groups, and ability levels.

This eLearning series includes three course modules designed to support inclusive coaching and optimal athletic development:

- **Fitness for the Sport Coach:** This foundational module covers essential fitness knowledge, strategies for integrating fitness into training, and its impact on performance and injury prevention.
- **Physical Activity for Sports Coaches:** This module explores types of physical activity and how to build a physical literacy-rich environment. Coaches will learn how to support lifelong participation in sport and physical activity for athletes through inclusive and engaging practices.
- **Sports Nutrition:** Offering a practical yet in-depth look at fueling for sport, this module covers key topics such as meal timing, performance nutrition, and how environmental and sport-specific demands influence nutritional needs.

[Show less](#) ^

### Step 3: Meet the Coaching Team

The SO Program staff or Head Coach will set up a meeting to talk about how you can best support the athletes. Topics to discuss include:

- Introductions to the coaching team
- Goals for the season
- Your roles and responsibilities
- Logistics



### Step 4: Meet the Athletes

Work with the Head Coach to determine the best time to meet the team. During the introductory session, have the Head Coach introduce you to the team and their families or caregivers, present the fitness plan together to create excitement, and gather input from the team on any additional goals or topics they would like to include. Share your attendance plan with the athletes so they know when to expect you.

**It's important to establish rapport with athletes, families and the coaching team.** This may take some time, so be prepared to simply attend a few practices or competitions and engage with the team so the athletes can get to know you before you start leading any activities.

## Thank You!

When you become a Fitness Coach, you join a team helping Special Olympics athletes get stronger, healthier, and more confident. It's a chance to work with amazing athletes, learn new skills, and grow your experience with a new and inspiring group. Take the first step, reach out to your local Special Olympics Program office, and get started on your Fitness Coach journey today.

## Key Supporting Resources

- [Active Practice Guidance](#)
- [Fit 5 Guide, Exercise Cards and Videos](#)
- [Fitness Assessment Toolkits](#)
- [Fitness Coach PowerPoint](#)
- [Fitness through Sport eLearning Plan](#)
  - [Fitness for the Sport Coach](#)
  - [Sports Nutrition](#)
  - [Physical Activity for Sports Coaches](#)
- [Fitness through Sport Playbook](#)
- [Health Tip Library](#)
- [Minimum "Fit" Practice Standards](#)
- [My Personal Health Goal template](#)
- [Inclusive Fitness eLearning Module](#)
- [School of Strength](#)
  - [Snack Zone](#)
- Special Olympics Fitness App
  - [Apple Store](#)
  - [Google Play Store](#)
- [Sport-Specific Warm-Up and Cool-Down Guides](#)
  - [Dynamic Warm-up and Cool-Down Videos](#)
- [Coach Education - Fitness Resources](#)

Special Olympics Health activities are supported by many sources, including in the United States by Grant Number NU27DD000021 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, with \$18.1 M (64%) financed with U.S. Federal funds and \$10.2 M (36%) supported by non-federal sources.

These contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the Department of Health and Human Services.