

# Fitness Coaches for Sports Teams

## Guidance for Head Coaches



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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. Anyone who wants to work with Special Olympics athletes, has an interest in health and fitness, and a willingness to learn can become a Fitness Coach. People who are well-suited for this role include Level 1 Sport Assistants, certified health and fitness professionals, family members, or other general volunteers.

### Why a Fitness Coach?

**A great athlete is a healthy athlete.** 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.

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 well-being.

### Fitness Coaches Support Head Coaches

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. **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 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 Role of a Fitness Coach

Fitness Coach support can be integrated into team routines in flexible, practical ways that fit a Head Coach's existing season or session plan. Support may take place during training sessions, between sessions, at competitions, or during the off-season, depending on team needs. For many teams, this looks like dedicating small, intentional moments – such as having a Fitness Coach lead warm-ups and cool-downs for five minutes, or offering optional fitness time before or after practice for up to 30 minutes.

As outlined in the [Fitness Coach Activation Guide](#), **common roles of a Fitness Coach include:**

- Leading, or supporting [Fitness Captains](#) in leading, warm-ups and cool-downs
- Suggesting fitness activities that fit naturally into drills
- Conducting fitness assessments throughout the season
- Supporting athletes with goal setting and habit tracking
- Leading [Fitness through Sport Playbook](#) lessons before or after sports practice
- Sharing fitness and health education with athletes and their supporters

Some teams involve a Fitness Coach at every practice, while others use them periodically throughout the season for activities with larger support needs, such as a Fitness Assessment Day. Both approaches can be effective, but starting small is encouraged. Teams may begin with a few key responsibilities and gradually expand the Fitness Coach's involvement as athletes and coaches become more comfortable and see the benefits.

Head Coaches are encouraged to discuss expectations early and check in often to ensure fitness support continues to align with team needs, upcoming competitions, and the overall flow of the season.

### Initial Head Coach-Fitness Coach Meeting (15-30 minutes)

Once your Program connects you with a Fitness Coach, meet with them to set clear expectations and build a strong working relationship. Here is a helpful agenda to follow:

#### 1. Introductions and Team Overview

- Fitness Coach: key experience, interest area(s) and strengths, preferences, and availability
- Head Coach: key experience, coaching style, and team culture
  - Overview athlete profiles, strengths, and general needs

#### 2. Season Goals and Priorities

- Define key goals for the sports season
- Identify 1-2 fitness focus areas

#### 3. Roles and Responsibilities

- Sports Coach: specific areas of responsibility
- Fitness Coach: specific areas of responsibility
- Additional Roles: Fitness Captains (if applicable), other coaches, and volunteers



#### 4. Logistics and Communication

- Training Session Details: location and schedule for Fitness Coach attendance
- Events: competition and/or special event involvement (if any)
- Communication: preferred methods and cadence
  - Additionally, preferred method of communication with athletes and their family or caregiver

#### 5. Next Steps

- Determine when to introduce the Fitness Coach to the team and share the fitness plan
- Outline what the first few Fitness Coach sessions will look like
- Determine a check-in timeline

**Questions or want to learn more about Fitness Coaches?** Contact your local Special Olympics Program or email [fitness@specialolympics.org](mailto:fitness@specialolympics.org).

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