



**Special
Olympics**
Ireland

FOOTBALL GRADING SYSTEM

Special Olympics

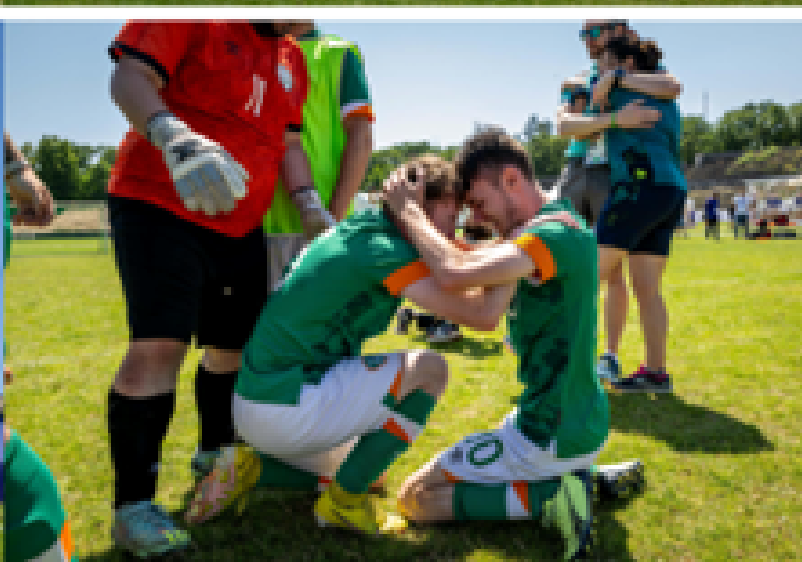
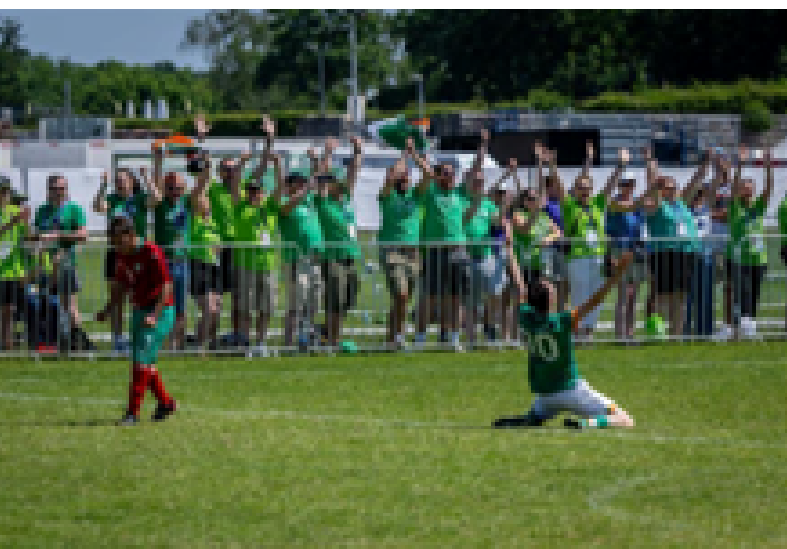


INTRODUCTION:

Football is more than just a game, it's a powerful tool for inclusion, personal development and community engagement. For athletes with Intellectual Disabilities, Special Olympics (SO) Ireland provides a structured and supportive environment to enjoy the sport and compete at various levels.

Since 2003, the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) has partnered with SO Ireland to promote inclusive football across the country. This partnership not only supports athlete participation and competition but also implements a structured grading system to ensure fair play and appropriate skill development, from local clubs to international competitions.

SO Ireland offers a vibrant and extensive football programme with 1270 athletes participating from all corners of the island. Training is ongoing in a large number of clubs all over the country. Players have a chance to compete at club, regional, All Ireland and International level in the 7-a-side game format.





“When I first got involved with Special Olympics Ireland (SO Ireland) I didn't realise or understand there was a Grading and Divisioning component but quickly understood its' necessity.

There is and always has been a very strong relationship between SO Ireland and the Football Association of Ireland (FAI). The FAI Football For All (FFA) programme is in place to allow everybody in the country to play the game of football regardless of their ability or disability. We have numerous FAI Development Officers (FAIDO) that engage with SO Ireland clubs in their respective regions.

We have also run bespoke FAI Coach Development courses for SO Ireland Coaches to upskill to help their players improve.

The cornerstone to allow and create the environment for all SO Ireland athletes to be involved in meaningful competition relies on the Grading and Divisioning of players. It has been an interesting journey for the FAI Staff as 'grading' players with a disability is a reach. We (FAI and SO Ireland) collaborated and developed a Grading and Divisioning workshop to educate the FAIDO's and SO Ireland Football coaches of the importance of Grading players and Divisioning Teams in the SO Ireland Football Leagues.

The FAI as part of our Football for All programme supports players with disabilities to play the game of football. The FAI and SO Ireland collaborate to ensure all competitions create the environment for all players to play at a level where there is meaningful competition. I have been a Coach and Coach Developer for over 40 years and have seen, at four Special Olympics World Summer Games working as a Head Coach, when the Grading and Divisioning works well and it is sport at its finest and purest.”

Paul Martyn,

National Coach Developer, Football Association of Ireland (FAI), and Special Olympics Ireland Football Head Coach.



FAI PARTNERSHIP:

The partnership between the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) and Special Olympics Ireland officially began in 2003.

This coincided with the 2003 SO World Summer Games, which were held in Dublin. This was the first time the Games took place outside of North America. The FAI played a significant role in supporting the football competitions during those Games and continued its involvement afterward, formalizing a long-term partnership with Special Olympics Ireland.

FOOTBALL FOR ALL (FFA) PROGRAMME:

The partnership between the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) has been significantly strengthened through the integration of the Football For All (FFA) programme. This initiative focuses on inclusion and aims to provide meaningful football opportunities for individuals with disabilities across the country.

As part of this collaboration, players can receive official International Caps for representing Ireland at European and World Games, aligning them with their mainstream counterparts in terms of national recognition. So far, 186 International Caps have been awarded, highlighting the commitment of athletes, coaches, and support staff, as well as the positive impact of the programme. The FFA continues to strengthen pathways for players while supporting wider goals around inclusion in sport.



Special Olympics Ireland Men's 7-a-side Football Team, receiving their international caps for competing in the Special Olympics World Games, Berlin 2023.

WHAT IS GRADING?

Grading identifies the standard/level of an athlete according to set criteria.

It applies in Special Olympics Ireland to team sports: basketball, football and floorball. At club level, it is most often athletes of mixed abilities that play together. Club teams compete in inter-club events, leagues, and regional qualifying competitions.

To advance to Special Olympics Ireland Games, International Competitions and World Games, athletes of similar ability are selected to form a composite team. Grading of a player is predominantly used for advancement purposes. Coaches also use it as a development tool for athletes. Grading is based on a set term of characteristics based on set criteria and not just the best player on the team.

It is important we don't confuse grading with divisioning. Divisioning looks at how a team performs together as a unit, whereas grading looks at an individual athlete based on the set criteria.

PLAYERS ARE ASSIGNED A GRADE AT FOUR DIFFERENT LEVELS AGAINST SET CRITERIA:

Outfielder:	Goalkeeper:
1. Positional Awareness	1. Agility/Fitness
2. Ball Mastery	2. Distribution
3. Passing	3. Positional Awareness
4. Fitness level	4. Shot Stopping

FOR SELECTION TO A WORLD GAMES, ATHLETES ARE GRADED THREE TIMES:

- 1. ONCE BY THEIR CLUB COACH**
- 2. ONCE AT A REGIONAL EVENT**
- 3. AGAIN AT SPECIAL OLYMPICS IRELAND GAMES TO ENSURE THE GRADE ASSIGNED TO A PLAYER IS A TRUE REFLECTION OF THEIR PLAYING ABILITY.**

Football Grading Process



CLUB LEVEL

Club Coaches carryout grading



REGIONAL LEVEL

Regional Development Officers and FAI Staff carryout grading



NATIONAL GAMES

FAI Staff carryout grading



2025 GRADING PROCESS:

459 ATHLETES PARTICIPATED IN THIS YEAR'S QUALIFYING COMPETITIONS. ALL ATHLETES UNDERWENT THE GRADING PROCESS TWICE:

- FIRST BY THEIR CLUB COACHES.
- THEN BY THE REGIONAL EVENTS TEAM, TYPICALLY MADE UP OF OUR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT OFFICERS (RDOS) AND SUPPORTED BY FAI RDOS.

4 OUT OF 5 REGIONS HOSTED REGIONAL LEAGUES DURING THE 2024/25 SEASON, WHICH TYPICALLY RUN FROM OCTOBER TO MAY.

45 MALE TEAMS TOOK PART IN REGIONAL QUALIFYING EVENTS:

- ALL 45 TEAMS ARE ELIGIBLE FOR THE IRELAND GAMES IN JUNE 2026.
- THE TEAM QUOTA FOR THE IRELAND GAMES IS 14 TEAMS.

Athlete Grading Levels



LEVEL

1

Players demonstrate a high level of ability across 4 grading criteria.

LEVEL

2

Players demonstrate a moderate level of ability across 4 grading criteria.

LEVEL

3

Players demonstrate a relatively low level of ability across 4 grading criteria.

LEVEL

4

Players demonstrate a low level of ability across 4 grading criteria.



Selections: The Grading process allows for selection of athletes to a team of similar ability. Where there are not enough numbers in single grade, teams may be combined. When combining grades, only grades next to one another can be combined e.g. in football, grade 1 cannot be combined with grade 3 and 4 (Ireland Games only).

GRADING SHEETS

PLAYERS ARE GRADED DEPENDING ON THEIR POSITION.

1. AS AN OUTFIELD PLAYER
2. AS A GOALKEEPER

Below is the Grading sheet a coach will use for an outfield player:



Football Grading Assessment Sheet (Outfield Players)

Athletes should be assessed in a game situation; graders may request some athletes to play further time if necessary.

Team Name: _____

Grader: _____

Athlete Name	No	Position	Positional Awareness	Ball Mastery	Passing	Fitness Level	Total	Grade
			1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
			1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
			1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
			1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
			1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
			1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
			1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
			1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
			1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		
			1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4	1 2 3 4		

Positions: D=Defender; M=Midfielder; F=Forward

01 GRADE 1

Once all scores are added up, a Grade 1 athlete's total score will be in the range of 4 to 5.

02 GRADE 2

Once all scores are added up, a Grade 2 athlete's total score will be in the range of 6 to 9.

03 GRADE 3

Once all scores are added up, a Grade 3 athlete's total score will be in the range of 10 to 13.

04 GRADE 4

Once all scores are added up, a Grade 4 athlete's total score will be in the range of 14 to 16.

ATHLETES AT **GRADE 4** WILL **NOT** BE ELIGIBLE FOR SELECTION TO EUROPEAN OR WORLD GAMES AS THIS IS DEEMED A DEVELOPMENT LEVEL IN TEAM SPORTS. GRADE 1 IS THE HIGHEST LEVEL.

OUTFIELD PLAYERS:

Players are assessed across fitness level, passing, ball mastery and positional awareness.

Level 1

- Athlete demonstrates a high level of fitness demonstrating speed, endurance and ability to move easily on the pitch.
- Athlete demonstrates ability to execute and receive a variety of passes while under pressure and chooses the correct pass to suit the situation.
- Athlete demonstrates excellent ball control, has the ability to combine numerous skills and take on players successfully while under pressure.
- Athlete has excellent positional awareness and understands their position and role within the team. They perform well when attacking or defending, even under pressure from opponents.

Level 2

- Athlete demonstrates a moderate level of fitness but struggles to keep up with the pace of the game at times.
- Athlete demonstrates ability to pass and receive a variety of passes but struggles with pass selection when under pressure.
- Athlete demonstrates good ball control, an ability to combine numerous skills and take on players successfully but can struggle under pressure.
- Athlete has good positional awareness and understands his position and role within the team, performs well when attacking or defending, but sometimes struggles under pressure from opponents.

Level 3

- Athlete demonstrates a relatively low level of fitness and struggles to keep up with the pace of the game.
- Athlete demonstrates the ability to make and receive basic passes but struggles under pressure.
- Athlete demonstrates moderate ball control and rarely combines skills and will try to off load the ball as soon as possible, often without accuracy. They will often lose possession.
- Athlete knows his position but may not understand his role in the team, performs ok as an individual player when attacking or defending, but always struggles under pressure from opponents.

Level 4

- Athlete demonstrates very low level of fitness and struggles with movement up and down the pitch.
- Athlete demonstrates low ability to make passes.
- Athlete demonstrates poor ball control and is unable to combine skills in a game situation.
- Athlete has no positional awareness and doesn't understand their role in the team.

GOALKEEPERS:

Players are assessed across Fitness/ Agility Level, Distribution, Positional awareness and Shot Stopping

Level 1

- Athletes demonstrates a high level of agility, speed of reaction around the goal area throughout the game.
- Athlete demonstrates very good ability to distribute the ball accurately while under pressure and chooses the correct method of distribution to suit the situation.
- Athlete has excellent positional awareness and understands his position and role within the team. They perform well when attacking or defending, even under pressure from opponents.
- Athlete demonstrates excellent ability to react and save a shot at all heights, speeds and angles.

Level 2

- Athlete demonstrates a moderate level of agility but struggles to keep up with the pace of the game at times.
- Athlete demonstrates good ability distribute the ball accurately but sometimes struggles when under pressure. May not choose the correct method of distribution to suit the situation.
- Athlete has good positional awareness and understands his position and role within the team, performs well when attacking or defending, but sometimes struggles under pressure from opponents.
- Athlete demonstrates good ability to react and save the ball, they will struggle with shots at certain heights, speeds and angles.

Level 3

- Athlete demonstrates a relatively low level of agility and rarely keeps up with the pace of the game, has poor reactions.
- Athlete demonstrates moderate ability to distribute the ball accurately without pressure and regularly losses possession with pressure.
- Athlete knows his position but may not understand his role in the team, performs ok as an individual player when attacking or defending, but always struggles under pressure from opponents.
- Athlete demonstrates moderate ability to react and save a shot, they will struggle with shots at most heights, speeds and angles.

Level 4

- Athlete demonstrates very low level of agility and is unable to keep with pace of game at all and little to no reactions.
- Athlete demonstrates low ability to distribute the ball accurately.
- Athlete demonstrates little knowledge of positional awareness.
- Athlete demonstrates very poor ability to react and save the shot.



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SELECTION PROCESS:

1. THE GRADE IS SELECTED (RANDOM DRAW).

- IRELAND GAMES: LEVELS 1-4
- WORLD GAMES/REGIONAL COMPETITIONS: LEVELS 1-3

2. ATHLETES ARE THEN SELECTED PER POSITION

• FOOTBALL (7-A-SIDE):

- 2 GOALKEEPER
- 4 DEFENSIVE PLAYERS
- 4 MIDFIELDERS
- 2 FORWARD

3. POSITIONS ARE SELECTED BASED ON MEDAL PRIORITY

- GOLD MEDAL PLAYERS IN THAT GRADE AND POSITION ARE SELECTED FIRST
- SILVER MEDAL PLAYERS IN THAT GRADE AND POSITION ARE NEXT FOR SELECTION
- BRONZE MEDAL PLAYERS IN THAT GRADE AND POSITION ARE NEXT FOR SELECTION



Special Olympics Ireland Men's 7-a-side Football Team, Special Olympics World Games, Berlin 2023. Division 1 Gold Medal Winners.

DEVELOPMENT OF FOOTBALL IN THE PROGRAMME SINCE THE INTRODUCTION OF THE GRADING SYSTEM:

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“WE INTRODUCED GRADING IN THE 2004/5 SEASON TO HELP BETTER PREPARE TEAMS FOR OUR NATIONAL GAMES. WE HAD IDENTIFIED ISSUES WITH TEAMS IN COMPETITION WHO HAD SUCH A RANGE OF ABILITIES THAT THEIR TEAM PERFORMANCE OVERALL SUFFERED WHEN A KEY PLAYER WAS SUBBED OFF OR INJURED. WE WANTED TO BE ABLE TO MAINTAIN THAT PERFORMANCE REGARDLESS OF WHO WAS ON THE PITCH FROM THE TEAM ROSTER. WE WORKED WITH THE FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION IN IRELAND THROUGH THEIR FOOTBALL FOR ALL PROGRAMME AND WITH THEIR HELP WE INTRODUCED THE GRADING OF EACH INDIVIDUAL PLAYER AGAINST SET CRITERIA TO ENABLE US TO FORM COMPOSITE TEAMS OF LIKE ABILITY FOR ADVANCEMENT TO IRELAND (NATIONAL) GAMES AND TO EUROPEAN OR WORLD GAMES. LOCAL TEAMS STILL HAVE THAT MIX OF ABILITY FOR LOCAL AND REGIONAL EVENTS.

THE ADDED BENEFIT OF GRADING FOR THE PROGRAMME, IS THAT THE TOOL ITSELF HELPS COACHES IDENTIFY AREAS FOR MORE TARGETED TRAINING OR AREAS THAT NEED A BIGGER FOCUS FOR THEIR PLAYERS. BECAUSE THE COACHES UNDERTAKE THE INITIAL GRADING OF PLAYERS, THEY CAN USE THE INFORMATION TO HELP BUILD THEIR TRAINING PLAN FOR THE SEASON. IT ALSO ASSISTS COMPETITION TEAMS WITH DIVISIONING AT AN EVENT AS YOU WILL KNOW IN ADVANCE WHAT LEVEL/GRADE OF PLAYERS ARE ON EACH TEAM SO YOU CAN PRE-DIVISION THE TEAMS AND IN MOST CASES REDUCE THE AMOUNT OF TIME SPENT AT A ONE-DAY EVENT ON THE SHORTENED DIVISIONING GAMES.

FROM A COMPETITION PERSPECTIVE IN ITS FIRST OUTING AT IRELAND GAMES IN 2006, WE HAD AN INCREASED RATE OF EXTRA TIME AND PENALTY SHOOT OUTS TO COMPLETE DIVISIONS WHICH PREVIOUSLY HAD NOT BEEN SEEN AT THIS LEVEL AND THE PLAYER SATISFACTION RATE ALSO INCREASED AS THERE WAS LESS FRUSTRATION BEING FELT WHEN PLAYERS WERE SUBBED OR INJURED.”

ELAINE TWOMEY,
SPORT DEVELOPMENT MANAGER, SPECIAL OLYMPICS IRELAND.



CONCLUSION:

Since 2003 when the FAI and Special Olympics formed a partnership, huge strides have been made in terms of football development for athletes with intellectual disabilities in Ireland. There are opportunities for athletes of all abilities to participate and compete at a level that is appropriate to them, thanks to the football grading system.

The partnership between the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) has been significantly strengthened through the integration of the Football For All (FFA) programme allowing for athletes to receive official International caps.

The grading system itself has a set procedure to allow coaches to grade athletes appropriately. The Athlete Grading Levels provide a structured and inclusive framework for evaluating players' abilities. By recognising varying skill levels, this system ensures that all athletes are supported and encouraged to reach their full potential within the Special Olympics and FAI programmes.

the grading system will continue to improve over time, ensuring every player regardless of ability is empowered to succeed.

You can access the Grading Sheets for [Outfield Players](#) and [Goalkeepers](#) by clicking on the links.

For further information on the Special Olympics Ireland Football Grading System please contact [Elaine Twomey](#), Sport Development Manager

