

How can coaches help Special Olympic athletes react to a swimming disqualification (DQ)?

Why coach response matters!

For many Special Olympics athletes, a disqualification can feel confusing, disappointing, or discouraging. How a coach responds in that moment can shape how the athlete views the experience, either as a setback or as a learning opportunity. It's important for coaches to understand that a 'one size fits all' approach doesn't always work in Special Olympics. Be a detective! Understand how each of your athletes communicates and receives information! Always ask questions to understand the learning style of your athletes!

1. Respond with Calm and Positivity

Your reaction sets the tone.

- Stay calm and neutral when discussing the DQ
- Avoid showing frustration or disappointment
- Use a steady voice and positive body language

In addition to the above, knowing what approaches and strategies help your athlete learn most effectively are crucial! Example below:

"Hey, let's take a breath together for a second. The official called an early take-off, which just means your feet left the block before the touch. It doesn't define your effort or your progress today. What I really liked was your readiness and commitment to the relay, the timing was aggressive, which shows confidence. Now we just refine the control and awareness part. Everyone learns relay timing through moments like this.





2. Finding the 'Why' in the DQ

Make it clear that the DQ is about a rule, not the athlete as a person. Start by asking your athlete if they know what caused the DQ? It is important that we put an emphasis on athletes being in control of their swim. If they are aware of what happened, coaches don't need to discuss this further. If not, then it is important to let your athlete know that you will support them in their technique and how to correct it to stay within the rules.

See an example reaction below:

- Say: "You swam well. We have to make sure that you swim within the rules - I will work with you so you can improve your technique to ensure you are in line with the rules for this stroke".

This helps the athlete's confidence and self-esteem and allows them to focus their attention on the technical aspects of the DQ. One effective approach is to review another relay together with your swimmer, using it as a teaching opportunity to walk through key points.





3. Explain the DQ simply and clearly

In the event that your athlete is not certain on the DQ that has been given, do everything you can to convey the information to your athlete in a simple and effective manner. Keep explanations short and easy to understand.

- Explain exactly what happened to cause the DQ, not every detail in the rulebook. If you are unsure of the reasoning of the DQ - get informed on it! Don't offer an explanation without knowing this as it could cause confusion.
- If your athlete wants to discuss this right away and you are unsure - be honest and reassure them that you will find the correct information and will work together with them to develop a correction plan.
- If you have the correct information, focus on one main coaching point that the athlete can remember for next time, use demonstrations, visuals or gestures to help with this.

Example

Say: "In Breaststroke, both hands must touch the wall together. One hand touched first this time in your race. Now we know this, let's put it into practice here on the wall before we get back into the pool!"





4. Keep the focus on the next step!

After a disqualification, many athletes can get stuck replaying the moment in their head. This can increase anxiety, frustration, or self-doubt and make it harder to enjoy the rest of the meet. Coaches can help by gaining full understanding of their athlete and their reactions before the competition. When setting future actions consider:

- Using calm, reassuring language to redirect attention
- Knowing the preference, choose a method of providing an action oriented plan for your athlete
- With your support, what steps can they take immediately (before a next race) or what steps in training can they take to prevent this happening again.

Do all of the above in a timely manner to ensure that the focus does not stay on the previous race, but on the next opportunity to swim and correct this DQ.



TIPS FROM MICHAEL & KIERA

Visualize the Race

Visualization helps athletes rehearse success. Have them close their eyes, walk through each part of the race (start/strokes/turns/finish). When they mentally practice the routine, they are calmer under pressure and less likely to make errors. It's just as important as physical training.

