



Project: Special Champions League
Deliverable: 4.1 – Special
Champions League Impact Report
Project Number: 101049289

Introduction Special Champions League

The Special Champions League (SCL) is an inclusive football programme developed by Special Olympics and the European Football for Development Network (EFDN) for young people aged 15 and older with intellectual disabilities. It provided a safe and supportive environment for participants to enjoy football, enhance physical activity, confidence, self-esteem and mental well-being while promoting a sense of inclusion.

Each year, Special Olympics Belgium with the support of EFDN organised the European Football Festivals across various locations in Europe. These events created opportunities for participants to engage in football at their own skill level, connect with their peers to form friendships and integrate into their communities. Prioritising enjoyment and relationship-building over competition, the festivals reflect the philosophy of Special Olympics, emphasising social inclusion and personal development.

The project also benefited participating clubs and the wider intellectual disability community by allowing organisations to expand their networks, strengthening the relationship with Special Olympics Europe / Eurasia, and encouraging the exchange of best practices. Moreover, participating organisations served as benchmarks for inclusive sports initiatives and acted as catalysts for further development in this field.

Co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union, this initiative focuses on integrating young people with intellectual disabilities into community life and increasing their general physical activity levels. By following strategies outlined in this guide, practitioners can deliver inclusive football sessions that provide both physical and mental benefits to their participants.

Purpose of the Special Champions League Impact report

The purpose of the Special Champions League Impact Report is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the project delivery and the tournament's influence on various stakeholders, including players, organisations, staff and their operating communities. This report is designed to highlight the tangible and intangible benefits derived from the SCL project.

One of the primary objectives of the report is to assess the impact of the project. It delves into how the project fosters inclusivity, promotes diversity, and serves as a platform for celebrating youngsters with an intellectual disability. By amplifying voices and showcasing the abilities of youngsters with an ID who may not traditionally be in the spotlight, the SCL project has become a beacon of inspiration for individuals and communities European-wide. The report gathers testimonials, anecdotes, and statistical evidence to demonstrate the transformative power of the project on personal and organisational levels.

Furthermore, the report evaluates the project effectiveness in fostering partnerships and collaboration. By bringing together stakeholders from diverse sectors—sports organizations, educational institutions, non-profits, and businesses—the project creates a network of shared purpose and mutual benefit. The report highlights success stories of partnerships that have resulted in enhanced programming, better resources for athletes, and broader outreach efforts.

Finally, the Special Champions League Impact Report serves as a tool for accountability and strategic planning. It provides actionable insights and recommendations based on its findings, ensuring that the SCL methodology continues to evolve in alignment with its mission and values. By articulating clear goals for the future, the report aims to inspire continued investment and participation from all stakeholders, solidifying the Special Champions League as a catalyst for positive change in sports and society alike.

Background information Special Champions League

The Special Champions League project aimed to establish an inclusive football movement, that provided frequent sporting opportunities for those with intellectual disabilities, alongside providing regular opportunities for socialisation between those with and without intellectual disabilities. The project was shaped and developed in line with the EU Work Plan for Sport 2021-2024 and the project addressed the horizontal priority 'Inclusion and diversity in all fields of education, training, youth and sport', while also addressing the sport-specific objectives 'Combating violence and tackling racism, discrimination and intolerance in sport' as well as 'Promoting education in and through sport'. This project sought to promote equal opportunities and access, inclusion, diversity and fairness to sport and physical activities for a unique target group, that required specific and specialised projects that would assist in their socialisation and acceptance in sports clubs and European communities.

The Special Champions League did provide a safe, inclusive, and active environment where young people over the age of 15 with intellectual disabilities came together and played football at a level they were all comfortable with, but provided additional opportunities to engage and socialise with young people who did not have intellectual disabilities in order to promote greater social inclusion and acceptance within the wider European population. Through sports and football, the project did get more young people with intellectual disabilities physically and socially active in their communities and increased integration and inclusion within society by educating those without disabilities. The Special Champions League project provided opportunities for participants to improve their physical health, increase their confidence, meet new people, learn about others, and establish social bonds. Young people with intellectual disabilities were identified as a key demographic that did not have enough opportunities in society and continued to be isolated within the project partner communities. By uniting young people with and without intellectual disabilities of the same age regularly, social integration and inclusion could be achieved. The project removed the stigma around disabilities and provided an opportunity for young people to develop new friendships and explore the differences and similarities between themselves.

Special Olympics identified that inclusive health means people with intellectual disabilities can take full advantage of the same health and sports programs and services available to people who do not have intellectual disabilities. In Europe, people with intellectual disabilities faced significant challenges accessing opportunities to participate in the same types of sports, fitness, and wellness activities, resulting in pronounced health disparities and reduced life expectancy. The current lack of socially inclusive physical activity available to those with intellectual disabilities needs to be addressed. Through the Special Champions League, the consortium aimed to address this disparity and increase the opportunities available to those with intellectual disabilities in Europe. Overall, the aim was to establish a methodology that can be replicated across Europe, by any organisation, subsequently helping to reduce disparity even further.

Background analysis

People with disabilities are among the most marginalised groups in the world, with Sen (2009) stating that people with disabilities are not only among the most disadvantaged in the world, but they are also among the most neglected in society. People with disabilities have poorer health outcomes, lower education achievements, less economic participation, and higher rates of poverty than people without disabilities (World Health Organisation., 2011). The CRPD and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development offer a plan for including all persons with disabilities in all aspects of society and development. Therefore, the consortium is made up of world-famous sporting organisations who believe they have the responsibility and ability to improve the lives of those who are disadvantaged, socially excluded and isolated within society through sport.

Intellectual disability, as defined by the World Health Organisation, Europe: “A significantly reduced ability to understand new or complex information and to learn and apply new skills (impaired intelligence). This results in a reduced ability to cope independently (impaired social functioning), and begins before adulthood, with a lasting effect on development. Disability depends not only on a child’s health conditions or impairments but also and crucially on the extent to which environmental factors support the child’s full participation and inclusion in society”.

The European Disability Forum (2020) states there are over 100 million people with disabilities in Europe, although the numbers of those with intellectual disabilities in Europe were not evident. According to the National Academy of Sciences, there are four severity categories of intellectual disabilities: Mild, Moderate, Severe, and Profound.

Mild is the most distributed form, with around 85% of those with intellectual disabilities considered to be mild. This is categorised as intellectual disabilities that still allows individuals to function in ordinary life with minimal levels of support. The diagnosis and assessment of intellectual disabilities have been established through a standardized measure of intelligence. Special Olympics states that there are currently over 200 million people in the world with intellectual disabilities (2020). The diversity of intellectual disabilities and the lack of understanding from society often lead to social exclusion and limited opportunities for this population group, justifying the need to deliver the Special Champions League.

The need to deliver programmes that target the social participation and integration of marginalised groups within Europe is becoming increasingly significant. Scifo et al., (2019) identified that sport intervention programmes have shown demonstrable success in improving the levels of physical, psychosocial health, and increase social inclusion in populations with intellectual disabilities. They further identified the need to adopt specific practice and policy in promoting social inclusion in order to provide quality experiences within sport and physical activity for people with intellectual disabilities. The key role sports and physical activity have been identified as playing in the promotion of well-being and social inclusion in people with intellectual disabilities is evident (WHO., 2017). It is further believed that programmes must be designed with the aim of establishing an environment where participants feel they relate to each other, subsequently increasing perceived levels of social integration and integration.

Those with intellectual disabilities also participate in physical activity less frequently than their non-disabled peers (Kapsal et al., 2019). Due to lower participation in physical activity, those with intellectual disabilities are more likely to be considered overweight or obese, as well as often displaying lower levels of strength, endurance, agility, flexibility, balance, and slower speeds than non-disabled people. This subsequently results in lower peak heart rate and lower peak oxygen uptake, lowering the intensity of physical activity that can be comfortably completed (Szmelcer et al., 2018). Due to this, it is important to provide a safe and inclusive environment where all participants are encouraged to play football at the level they are comfortable at. Healthy lifestyle interventions are continuing to grow in popularity across Europe, however programmes targeted at providing health-enhancing physical activity to those with intellectual disabilities are still under representative of the population (Salomon et al., 2018). Despite this, it is believed and demonstrated that participation in regular team sport can bring positive impacts to individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families in terms of potential physical health, social inclusion and psychological vulnerabilities, (Journal of Paralympic Research Group; Burns et al., 2020). Learning movement and sports skills particularly appear to benefit physical and psychosocial health, especially during youth (Kapsal et al., 2019).

There are many barriers identified to physical activity for people with intellectual disabilities, and these barriers vary from person to person. The most commonly identified barriers are the lack of funding, problems with accessing public exercise areas, problems with transport, and the stigma around those with intellectual disabilities participating in physical activity. In relation to football, one of the biggest barriers to participation for those with intellectual disabilities is the limited number of coaches and trainers who are sufficiently trained to understand their specific needs, abilities, and limitations when playing football. This subsequently has an impact on the available opportunities locally to play on a regular basis. Due to this, it is of utmost importance to deliver a programme that not only focusses on increasing physical activity participation and social inclusion of participants but also focusses on the development and learning of all participating coaches.

To meet this need, during the Special Champions League, coaches were trained on how to successfully deliver football sessions designed specifically for those with intellectual disabilities and learn how to adapt their delivery methods to ensure all participants feel confident and included. To achieve this, there were specific training delivered by the Special Olympics partners within the consortium during the transnational project meetings to ensure coaches are fully prepared and confident to deliver a football project for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, participants who are identified as role models and demonstrate leadership qualities will be given the opportunity to assist with the delivery and design of sessions.

Those who successfully demonstrate these skills and qualities were awarded a Special Champions League Leadership Certificate at the end of the programme and joined the Tandem Coaching Programme'. Another common barrier for people with intellectual disabilities is the opportunity to play football within a reasonable travelling distance of their home however during the project, it was not an issue given the right preparation of the participants, their carers and their families/guardians.

The Special Champions League provided the opportunity for people with intellectual disabilities to participate locally in tailor-made football sessions in eight cities across Europe, as well as being given the opportunity to participate in the four European Special Champions League Match Days in Leverkusen, Lisbon, Breda and Ghent. Furthermore, invitations to participate in the European Special Champions League was extended to other interested football clubs across Europe who have their own intellectual disability football teams. Both participation in the local Special Champions league and the European Special Champions League Match Day provided incredible experiences for the participants.

A full overview of the statistics related to the project can be found in Deliverable 3.1. The impact report below talks about the impact of the tournaments and the overall impact of the project.

The Impact of the Special Champions League Tournaments

1. Introduction

The Special Champions League (SCL) tournaments have been a key highlight of the project, providing an international platform for inclusion, competition, and cultural exchange. While the core activities took place within each partner club’s local environment, the tournaments served as **multiplier sports events**, offering participants the opportunity to **connect across cultures and borders**—regardless of the language they speak.

These tournaments were designed not only as competitive events but also as **celebrations of personal growth and achievement**. Players had the chance to showcase the skills they had developed throughout their home seasons and bring them onto a bigger stage. Each event was carefully organised to provide a **safe, professional, and welcoming environment**, ensuring that every player felt valued and special.

In total, four tournaments were organised across Europe:

Tournament	Location	Date
1st	Lisbon, Portugal	February 2023
2nd	Leverkusen, Germany	July 2023
3rd	Breda, Netherlands	May 2024
4th	Ghent, Belgium	October 2024

These events attracted teams from across Europe, including **partner clubs** that were central to the project:

- **Netherlands:** NAC Breda, NEC Nijmegen
- **Germany:** Werder Bremen, Bayer 04 Leverkusen
- **Spain:** Levante UD, Huesca (Fundación Alcoraz)
- **Portugal:** SL Benfica
- **Belgium:** KAS Eupen

Beyond these core teams, several **guest clubs** participated in different tournaments, adding to the diversity and excitement of the events. These included **Juventus, Club Brugge, Ajax, Everton, KV Mechelen, Manchester City**, and many more.

The Special Champions League tournaments **demonstrated the power of football to unite people**, creating lifelong memories for players, coaches, and supporters alike. These tournaments not only reinforced the impact of the project but also showcased the **potential for inclusive football at the highest level**.

2. Overview of Each International Match Day Tournament

The Special Champions League hosted four international tournaments across Europe, bringing together teams from various football foundations and Special Olympics programs. These tournaments not only provided a competitive platform for players with intellectual disabilities but also fostered social inclusion, camaraderie, and unforgettable experiences.

International Tournament 1 – Lisbon, Portugal (February 2023)

The first tournament took place in Lisbon, Portugal, at the football facilities next to the iconic Estadio da Luz, home of SL Benfica. The event started with an evening welcome session inside the stadium, where teams gathered for dinner and participated in fun activities designed to strengthen bonds among players and staff.

On match day, teams first played divisioning matches to ensure balanced competition by grouping teams according to skill level. After a day of competitive but friendly football, all players participated in a closing ceremony, where they each received medals in recognition of their efforts. The event concluded with a stadium tour, followed by a group dinner in the city centre.

Participating Teams:

Team	Country
Fundación Alcoraz	Spain
Bayer 04 Leverkusen	Germany
Benfica Foundation	Portugal
KAS Eupen	Belgium
NEC Nijmegen Maatschappij	Netherlands
Werder Bremen	Germany
Levante Foundation	Spain
Ajax Only Friends	Netherlands
Everton in the Community	United Kingdom
Foundation 92	United Kingdom
Special Olympics Portugal	Portugal
Juventus for Special	Italy

International Tournament 2 – Leverkusen, Germany

The second tournament took place at the Bay Arena facilities in Leverkusen, Germany. Upon arrival, teams enjoyed a social evening inside the stadium hotel, where they shared dinner and took part in interactive games. This format was adjusted based on feedback from the Lisbon tournament to enhance player experience.

On competition day, the tournament followed a similar structure, beginning with divisioning matches to ensure fair play. A new feature was introduced in this edition: a mixed training session on the final day. Players from all teams were grouped together for a series of fun drills designed by partner coaches. The session proved highly successful and was met with overwhelmingly positive feedback.

Participating Teams:

Team	Country
Fundación Alcoraz	Spain

Bayer 04 Leverkusen	Germany
Benfica Foundation	Portugal
KAS Eupen	Belgium
NEC Nijmegen Maatschappij	Netherlands
Werder Bremen	Germany
Levante Foundation	Spain
NAC Breda Maatschappij	Netherlands
Everton in the Community	United Kingdom
Juventus for Special	Italy
Special Olympics Germany	Germany

International Tournament 3 – Breda, Netherlands

The third tournament was hosted at the B.S.V Boeimeer Football Complex in Breda, Netherlands. Teams were accommodated at hotels near the train station, ensuring convenient logistics. The opening evening featured a special highlight: teams attended a live match at NAC Breda's Rat Verlegh Stadion, where they witnessed the club's Dutch league promotion play-off match, creating an unforgettable experience for all participants.

The second day followed the now-established format of divisioning matches, competitive group matches, and a closing ceremony. The festivities continued with a celebratory BBQ dinner, music, games, and a treasure hunt in Breda's city centre, fostering interaction and unity among participants. On the final day, a joint training session at NAC Breda's stadium allowed players to mix, train, and enjoy football together.

Participating Teams:

Team	Country
Fundación Alcoraz	Spain
Bayer 04 Leverkusen	Germany
Benfica Foundation	Portugal
KAS Eupen	Belgium
NEC Nijmegen Maatschappij	Netherlands
Werder Bremen	Germany
Levante Foundation	Spain
NAC Breda Maatschappij	Netherlands
City in the Community	United Kingdom
Juventus for Special	Italy

Special Champions League Festival – Ghent, Belgium

The largest event of the series took place in Ghent, Belgium, at the Blaarmeersen Sporting Centre. The festival featured 22 participating teams from football foundations and Special Olympics National Programmes across Europe. The tournament setup ensured a professional environment, with well-equipped facilities and an organized accreditation process.

Matches were played over two days, starting with divisioning games to create balanced competition levels. The event featured various off-pitch activities, including a large outdoor event zone where teams enjoyed meals and socialized. A major highlight was the American BBQ party, accompanied by music and dancing, which added to the celebratory atmosphere.

The final day saw teams competing for their final rankings, with a documentary crew from DAZN Belgium capturing the event. The tournament ended with a lively awards ceremony, where each team received medals, followed by smooth travel arrangements for departure.

Participating Teams:

Team	Country
Fundación Alcoraz	Spain
Bayer 04 Leverkusen	Germany
Benfica Foundation	Portugal
FC Rheinsüd Köln	Germany
North London United	United Kingdom
Werder Bremen	Germany
Levante Foundation	Spain
NAC Breda Maatschappij	Netherlands
SV Zulte-Waregem	Belgium
Juventus One	Italy
KV Mechelen	Belgium
Club Brugge	Belgium
KV Kester-Gooik	Belgium
Special Olympics (SO) Luxembourg	Luxembourg
SO France	France
SO Danmark	Denmark
SO Poland	Poland
SO Isle of Man	Isle of Man
SO Italy	Italy
Special Devils 1 (RBFA)	Belgium
Special Devils (RBFA)	Belgium
Special Flames (RBFA)	Belgium

Conclusion

Across all four tournaments, the Special Champions League successfully provided an inclusive, well-structured, and enjoyable football experience for athletes with intellectual disabilities. The combination of competitive football, social activities, and cultural experiences ensured that players, coaches, and staff gained valuable memories and new friendships. The gradual implementation of feedback-driven improvements, such as the mixed training sessions and varied social activities, contributed to the overall success of the series, reinforcing the importance of sport as a tool for inclusion and personal growth.

The final tournament of the Special Champions League was the largest and most ambitious event of the entire project, serving as the grand culmination of our collective efforts. Hosted by Special Olympics Belgium, this event significantly scaled up the competition, engaging 22 teams from across Europe and marking a historic milestone in inclusive football.

Venue & Atmosphere

The tournament was held at a premier venue in Ghent, Belgium, designed to cater to both the competitive and social dimensions of the event. A dedicated festival zone was integrated within the venue, providing an interactive experience for participants and spectators alike. This area featured a fully equipped entertainment stage, ample seating arrangements, official tournament merchandise stands, diverse food stalls, and even a beach zone for relaxation.

The fantastic weather conditions further enhanced the experience, allowing participants to enjoy the event both on and off the pitch. The atmosphere was electric, reinforcing the inclusive and celebratory nature of the competition.

Broad Participation & Organisational Challenges

Bringing together 22 teams—many of which were outside the initial project consortium—was a logistical challenge. However, leveraging the extensive networks of EFDN and Special Olympics proved instrumental in securing a diverse and competitive lineup. Alongside the European clubs teams, the involvement of multiple Jupiler Pro League teams and Special Olympics delegations from across Europe showcased the tournament's reach and prestige.

This large-scale participation also reinforced the tournament's core mission of fostering social inclusion through football. The teams represented a mix of professional club community foundations, grassroots organisations, and Special Olympics delegations, providing a rich competitive environment and an unprecedented opportunity for cultural exchange among players.

Social & Cultural Integration

A highlight of the event was the Saturday evening social programme, which featured a large-scale BBQ dinner followed by a dynamic dance party. These social gatherings played a critical role in promoting cross-cultural interaction, as players from different countries connected despite language barriers. The tournament's emphasis on fostering friendships beyond the pitch was evident, with numerous players forming bonds that extended beyond the tournament itself.

The success of the social programme underscores a crucial lesson in inclusive sports initiatives: off-the-field interactions are just as vital as on-field competition in achieving meaningful integration.

Professional Awarding Ceremony & Institutional Support

The tournament concluded with a professional awarding ceremony on Sunday, a fitting tribute to the participants' dedication and sportsmanship. The event featured a grand stage setup, formal team presentations, professional announcements, and even a fireworks display. Notably, the mayor of Ghent attended the ceremony, underscoring the broader societal recognition of inclusive sports initiatives. High-ranking officials from Special Olympics Europe Eurasia and Special Olympics Belgium were also present, reinforcing the commitment of both organisations to sustaining the momentum of inclusive football.

Key Lessons Learned & Impact on Participants

1. **The Value of Large-Scale Inclusion Events** – Organising a tournament of this magnitude demonstrated that inclusive sports initiatives can thrive at a major scale, provided there is structured logistical support and strategic partnerships. The expanded participant pool enhanced competition levels, increased visibility, and solidified the event's status as a reference point for future inclusive tournaments.

2. **Creating a Multi-Dimensional Experience Enhances Engagement** – The combination of competitive matches, leisure activities, and social bonding opportunities created a holistic experience. Many participants expressed that the social interactions off the pitch were just as impactful as the matches themselves, reinforcing the importance of designing tournaments that extend beyond sports.
3. **Cross-Cultural Exchange Is a Powerful Tool for Inclusion** – Football served as a universal language throughout the tournament, bridging cultural and linguistic divides. Several players from different countries exchanged contact details, expressing interest in staying in touch and even visiting each other's clubs in the future. This illustrates how sport-based events can foster long-term connections and break down societal barriers.
4. **Institutional Involvement Elevates Recognition** – The presence of high-profile figures such as the mayor of Ghent and organisational leadership enhanced the legitimacy and visibility of the event. This level of engagement is crucial for securing long-term funding and policy support for inclusive sports programmes.
5. **Scaling Up Requires Advanced Logistical Planning** – Managing 22 teams, multiple event zones, and social activities required a significantly higher level of logistical coordination than smaller tournaments. Future large-scale tournaments must integrate advanced scheduling systems, expanded volunteer support, and increased pre-event coordination to ensure a seamless experience.
6. **Participant Feedback Highlights Personal Growth** – Post-event interviews with players revealed substantial personal development gains, including increased confidence, social adaptability, and a stronger sense of belonging. Many players described the tournament as a transformative experience, highlighting the psychological and emotional benefits of participation.

Conclusion

Across all four tournaments, the Special Champions League successfully provided an inclusive, well-structured, and enjoyable football experience for athletes with intellectual disabilities. The combination of competitive football, social activities, and cultural experiences ensured that players, coaches, and staff gained valuable memories and new friendships. The gradual implementation of feedback-driven improvements, such as the mixed training sessions and varied social activities, contributed to the overall success of the series, reinforcing the importance of sport as a tool for inclusion and personal growth.

4. Competitive and Inclusive Aspects

A key objective of the tournament series was to ensure a balanced competitive structure that maintained the core principles of inclusion and participation. Across the first three tournaments, no formal winners were crowned, underscoring the emphasis on equitable play rather than a results-driven mindset. This approach aligned with best practices in disability sport, where structured competition is designed to maximise engagement without fostering exclusionary hierarchies.

To facilitate even competition, a rigorous assessment process was implemented prior to each tournament. Coaches were required to complete pre-event assessment forms evaluating their teams' skill levels across multiple parameters, including technical ability, tactical awareness, mobility, and in-game decision-making. These assessments were then reviewed by the organising delegation, who categorised teams into two competition groups of comparable ability (In the final tournament in Ghent there was 4 groups).

To further refine competitive balance, the first matches of each tournament were designated as "divisioning games." These initial fixtures provided organisers with empirical insights into the relative strengths of each team, allowing for adjustments where necessary. This system proved highly effective in ensuring that all teams faced opponents of a similar calibre, reducing the likelihood of significant score disparities and enhancing the quality of engagement for all participants. Observational data consistently demonstrated that some teams were initially over- or underestimated, necessitating in-tournament adjustments. The flexibility of this model was crucial in upholding the integrity of the competition and maximising the overall experience for participants.

The decision not to allocate points or declare winners in the first three tournaments was instrumental in fostering an environment where players could focus on their enjoyment of the game rather than external pressures associated with results. Notably, some teams engaged in informal scorekeeping for personal reference, but this remained a peripheral activity without detracting from the inclusive ethos of the event. The final tournament introduced a competitive ranking system within each level-based group, alongside a Fair Play Award to recognise teams exemplifying outstanding sportsmanship. This subtle shift in competition structure allowed for a more traditional sporting experience while preserving the inclusive foundation established in previous events.

The adaptation of rules to align with Special Olympics regulations was essential in ensuring accessibility for players with intellectual disabilities. Special Olympics football rules provide a structured framework that prioritises simplicity, clarity, and fairness, making them highly suitable for mixed-ability tournaments. Prior to each event, a dedicated coaches' meeting was conducted to brief team representatives on procedural expectations, tournament logistics, and rule adaptations. This meeting served as a vital platform for addressing queries and reinforcing key principles of inclusive play.

Similarly, on the morning of each tournament, referees participated in a technical briefing session to standardise their understanding of the competition's adapted rules. This measure was crucial in ensuring consistent officiating and minimising discrepancies that could lead to confusion or frustration among participants. The alignment of refereeing standards with Special Olympics guidelines contributed to a seamless playing experience, further reinforcing the inclusive framework of the tournament.

Impact and Lessons Learned

The competitive balance framework implemented throughout the tournaments had a profound impact on participant engagement and overall tournament integrity. By prioritising level-based groupings and employing a dynamic divisioning process, organisers successfully mitigated the risk of lopsided encounters, which can often lead to disengagement or diminished self-confidence among players with intellectual disabilities. The flexibility to adjust team placements after the divisioning games and before round robin, also ensured that real-time observations informed the competitive structure, fostering an optimal balance between challenge and enjoyment.

The decision to maintain a non-ranking format in the initial tournaments proved beneficial in reinforcing the event's inclusive ethos, allowing players to focus on personal and collective development rather than external validation through results. The introduction of rankings in the final

tournament demonstrated a well-calibrated evolution of the competition format, catering to teams that valued structured competition while preserving the fundamental principles of fair play and inclusion.

Moreover, the integration of Special Olympics rules and structured pre-event technical briefings enhanced the tournament's accessibility and operational efficiency. Coaches and referees entered each event with a clear understanding of the adapted regulations, reducing the likelihood of rule-related disputes and ensuring consistent experience for all teams. This approach also empowered coaching staff to better support their players, fostering a more inclusive and constructive competitive environment.

Ultimately, the tournament's competitive structuring successfully balanced the dual objectives of fostering inclusivity and maintaining an engaging level of sporting challenge. The applied methodologies provide a replicable model for future inclusive football tournaments, demonstrating that competition and inclusion are not mutually exclusive but can be harmonised through thoughtful planning and adaptive execution.

5. Impact on Participants

The Special Champions League tournaments yielded profound effects on participants, extending far beyond the immediate sporting environment. The structured and inclusive format allowed players with intellectual disabilities to engage in competitive football in a setting that prioritised equal opportunity, personal growth, and social interaction. By balancing structured competition with a celebratory atmosphere, the event series created tangible benefits across psychological, social, and physical domains, significantly influencing self-confidence, motivation, and overall well-being.

Psychological and Emotional Impact

For many participants, these tournaments represented a unique platform for personal development. A recurring observation was the noticeable increase in self-efficacy and emotional resilience among players. Competing in an organised setting, often in a high-profile venue, cultivated a sense of legitimacy and belonging that many had not previously experienced in mainstream football structures. Several players who had initially exhibited signs of performance anxiety or apprehension gradually adapted to the competitive environment, demonstrating increased confidence and assertiveness as the tournaments progressed.

Social Integration and Community Building

One of the most significant outcomes was the enhancement of social connectedness. Many athletes had previously operated in isolated environments with limited access to inclusive sporting events. The tournaments provided an unprecedented opportunity to interact with peers from various cultural backgrounds, strengthening interpersonal skills and fostering cross-border friendships. The social events, such as the large-scale BBQ dinner and dance party, played a crucial role in solidifying these connections, breaking down language barriers through shared experiences.

The inclusive structure of the tournament also extended to team staff, volunteers, and spectators, ensuring that everyone, regardless of background or ability, felt valued and included. This broader social cohesion translated into improved interpersonal communication skills and a greater willingness among participants to engage in structured group activities beyond football.

Sporting Development and Physical Benefits

From a sporting perspective, the tournaments provided a structured environment for skill development and tactical progression. The divisioning process ensured that teams competed against opponents of a similar ability level, allowing for meaningful, well-balanced matches that maximised both engagement and skill acquisition. Players exhibited improvements in technical execution, spatial awareness, and teamwork over the course of the tournaments, driven by the structured nature of the matches and pre-tournament assessment.

The emphasis on Special Olympics-modified rules also enabled participants to develop their understanding of adapted football principles, reinforcing key aspects such as fair play, positional awareness, and controlled aggression. The awarding of a fair play prize further encouraged positive on-field behaviour, reinforcing the intrinsic values of sportsmanship and respect for opponents.

Long-Term Influence and Legacy

The cumulative effect of participating in these tournaments has extended well beyond the event days themselves. Many teams reported that players returned home with heightened enthusiasm for training, increased engagement in local football initiatives, and a stronger sense of belonging within their club structures.

Moreover, the integration of teams from professional clubs and elite European football organisations further reinforced the legitimacy of inclusive football. For players, donning the colours of prestigious clubs and receiving official recognition from club representatives served as a powerful motivator, reinforcing their sense of identity within the football community.

In conclusion, the Special Champions League series provided a holistic developmental experience for all participants, instilling confidence, social cohesion, and competitive sporting spirit in a professionally structured environment. The impact on individual players, as well as the broader football and disability sport ecosystem, underscores the importance of continuing such initiatives to drive long-term change in inclusive football.

6. Organisational Impact and Challenges

Logistical Efforts and Key Learnings

The successful execution of multiple international tournaments required extensive logistical coordination, from venue selection and travel arrangements to accommodation, scheduling, and resource allocation. The collaborative effort between EFDN, Special Olympics, and local hosts played a pivotal role in ensuring smooth operations. One of the key learnings was the feasibility of team travel, with a standard delegation size of two staff members and eight players proving to be an efficient model. While organising international travel can be complex, the structured approach taken by the organisers ensured minimal disruptions.

The structuring of competition formats was another critical organisational aspect. Implementing pre-tournament assessments and divisioning games helped maintain competitive balance, contributing to a positive playing experience for all participants. The early establishment of these structures proved essential in minimising on-site adjustments and allowed for seamless tournament execution.

Challenges Faced and Solutions Implemented

One of the primary logistical challenges encountered was the cost and feasibility of travel for teams from remote areas. While most teams managed travel without major obstacles, financial constraints were more pronounced for those from geographically distant locations. Moreover, centralised accommodation solutions helped optimise costs and facilitated an inclusive tournament environment where teams could interact beyond matchdays.

Venue selection also posed a challenge, particularly in securing high-quality facilities that met accessibility and safety standards. However, leveraging the networks of local hosts significantly eased this process. Partnering with professional clubs further enhanced the experience, as seen in instances where football activities were held on NAC Breda's stadium pitch or the first tournament being held in close proximity to the iconic Benfica Stadium. These experiences provided participants with a professional footballing atmosphere, further elevating their motivation and engagement.

Another challenge involved aligning refereeing standards across different tournaments. Given the adaptations required for athletes with intellectual disabilities, it was essential to ensure consistency in rule application. This was addressed through structured referee briefings prior to each tournament, where officials were educated on Special Olympics regulations and given scenario-based training to enhance their understanding of adapted officiating.

Contributions from Local Partners, Sponsors, and Volunteers

The role of local partners, sponsors, and volunteers was instrumental in the successful execution of these tournaments. Professional football clubs, municipal authorities, and Special Olympics provided essential infrastructure and logistical support, making high-calibre facilities available and assisting with event organisation. Their contributions not only reduced organisational burden but also elevated the overall quality of the events.

Also, the EU funding played a crucial role in covering operational costs, with financial backing helping offset expenses related to venue hire, travel subsidies, and participant amenities.

Volunteers formed the backbone of on-ground operations, assisting with event logistics, player support, and spectator engagement. Many volunteers were sourced through local Special Olympics networks or football foundations, ensuring that they had prior experience working with athletes with intellectual disabilities. Their involvement not only ensured smooth tournament execution but also fostered a greater sense of community ownership over the events.

Conclusion

The logistical success of these tournaments underscores the viability of organising large-scale inclusive sporting events through collaborative planning, strategic partnerships, and structured competition frameworks. Challenges such as travel costs and venue selection were effectively managed through proactive solutions and network-driven approaches. The integration of professional football settings, structured officiating protocols, and local partnerships significantly enhanced both organisational efficiency and participant experience, setting a strong precedent for future editions of such tournaments.

7. Looking Ahead

The impact of these events has equipped all participating organisations with the experience and knowledge necessary to independently host inclusive football tournaments in the future. The learnings from this project ensure that football clubs, community organisations, and Special Olympics are now better prepared to organise their own competitions tailored to athletes with intellectual disabilities.

A key ambition for the future is to further expand the reach of inclusive football by integrating similar tournament structures into existing grassroots and professional club initiatives. The model established by the Special Champions League—structured competition, strong collaboration between clubs and Special Olympics, and a focus on both competitive and social aspects—provides a blueprint for future sustainable events. The experience gained from organising these tournaments will allow future hosts to refine event planning, ensure better competitive balancing, and create engaging side activities that enhance the overall experience for participants.

One of the most significant legacies of this project is the reinforcement of networks between professional clubs, disability sports organisations, and local communities. These strengthened connections mean that even in the absence of a formalised Special Champions League tournament, opportunities for inclusive football will continue to grow. Clubs that were involved in the project have seen first-hand the value of engaging with Special Olympics and other inclusion-focused initiatives, making them more likely to continue supporting such activities within their own structures.

Furthermore, the project has set a precedent for tournament organisation within the disability sports sector. The methodologies developed—including divisioning processes, level-based grouping, and tailored referee training—can serve as best practices for other organisations seeking to implement high-quality, inclusive football competitions. By demonstrating the feasibility of hosting such tournaments at a high standard, the Special Champions League has made it more likely that professional clubs will integrate inclusive football into their broader community engagement strategies.

Sustainability is a key aspect of the tournament's impact. While the project itself may not continue in its current form, the long-term effect is clear: more clubs, foundations, and Special Olympics programmes are now capable of independently hosting structured, competitive, and socially enriching football events. This ensures that the momentum generated by the Special Champions League will not be lost but rather channelled into new initiatives that keep the spirit of the project alive well into the future.



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