

**National Evaluation of the Special Olympics
Unified Sports Program**

**Center for Social Development and Education
University of Massachusetts Boston**

And

**Department of Special Education
University of Utah**

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National Evaluation of the Special Olympics Unified Sports Program

Evaluation Team

Principal Investigators

Gary N. Siperstein, University of Mass. Boston
Michael L. Hardman, University of Utah

Project Director

Matthew T. Wappett
University of Utah

Research Assistant

Laura Clary
University of Mass. Boston

Interviewers

Steve Gould
Matt Jans
Jennifer Mederios
Emily Rickards
Kelly Clark
University of Mass. Boston

Chris Clark
Echo Cunningham
Shamby Polychronis
University of Utah

Consultant

Floyd J. Fowler
Center for Survey Research
University of Mass. Boston

Advisory Committee

David M. Compton
Robert “Beau” Doherty
Charles Lakin
JoAnn Simons

Frank Dashnaw
Patrick Hammbke
Glenn Roswall
Marjorie Loya

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Background

For more than thirty years, Special Olympics has been dedicated to providing athletic training and sports competition for individuals with mental retardation. Beginning in 1968 with only 1,000 athletes from 26 states and Canada, Special Olympics has grown to include 20,000 competitions annually within the 50 U.S. states and 164 nations around the world. The goal of Special Olympics is twofold: (1) provide athletes with mental retardation the opportunity to experience the excitement and joy of participation in sports, and (2) enhance physical and social skills, as well as overall health.

Since its inception, Special Olympics has continually responded to changes in societal policies and attitudes toward individuals with mental retardation. One such change has been the “inclusion movement” wherein individuals with mental retardation participate in general education classrooms and schools, integrated workplaces, and their local communities. Special Olympics responded by developing the Integrated Sports program, later renamed Unified Sports®. The goal of Unified Sports was to bring together individuals with and without mental retardation of similar age and ability to compete as a team on an equal playing field. As a member of this integrated team, athletes with mental retardation could then contribute to its success. The priority for athletes with and without mental retardation was to engage in sports training and competition as a means to improve their specific sports skills, knowledge of sports’ rules, sportsmanship, and team play. Equally paramount was the goal of improving self-esteem and self-confidence among athletes with mental retardation, as well as promoting social acceptance among athletes without mental retardation.

The idea for Unified Sports was conceived in Massachusetts, fueled by the vision of one person, Robert “Beau” Doherty, with the encouragement and support of Eunice Kennedy Shriver. With the concepts of normalization and “social role valorization” as a backdrop, the first integrated sports league was held at Dever State School in Taunton Massachusetts, utilizing Bridgewater State College students as non-disabled teammates. Years later, in response to the expansion of an integrated softball program, representatives from the ARC of Massachusetts wrote:

For so many years the mentally retarded have lived, worked, and played apart from the community at large...It really helps our athletes to feel that they have finally broken the barrier – they are part of the community in all aspects now, including recreation.” (Worcester ARC, Sept. 19, 1984).

From 1984 to 1989 several individuals, including Dr. Tom Songster and George Smith, made a concerted effort to bring Unified Sports into the nationwide Special Olympics family. With the endorsement of Mrs. Shriver, Unified Sports became an official part of Special Olympics in 1989.

As a means to further the overall mission of Special Olympics, Unified Sports was created to ensure that people with and without mental retardation would have the opportunity to play together in competitive sports, thereby breaking down barriers that have historically kept these individuals isolated from one another. As stated in the most recent Unified Sports handbook, it is “a program that combines approximately equal numbers of Special Olympics athletes with peer athletes without mental retardation (partners) on sports teams for training and competition.” An important characteristic of the program is that all the participants (athletes with mental retardation and their partners) are intended to be of similar age and similar ability and

have the necessary skill level to participate in the sport. The stated goals of Unified Sports include:

- 1) Bring together athletes with and without mental retardation in a setting where all athletes are challenged to improve their skills;
- 2) Provide a valuable sports opportunity to individuals with mental retardation who are not presently involved with Special Olympics; especially those with mild retardation, and those in communities where there are not enough athletes to conduct team sports;
- 3) Prepare athletes with higher-level skills for participation in school or community sports;
- 4) Increase public awareness of the spirit and skills of individuals with mental retardation;
- 5) Enable Special Olympics athletes' siblings to participate as team members or coaches on Unified Sports teams;
- 6) Enable athletes to develop friendships and an understanding of each other's capabilities through a spirit of equality and team unity;
- 7) Enhance each athlete's self-esteem.

(Unified Sports Guidebook, 1992, p.3)

Over the years, there have been a number of conferences, meetings, and "position papers" concerning the policies and operating principles of Unified Sports. In 1997, a U.S.-based Unified Sports Resource Committee was established to address the continued expansion of Unified Sports both within the U.S. and worldwide. In the summer of 1998, the United States Leadership Council's (USLC) Games and Competition Committee sponsored a Unified Sports Summit which had a number of goals, including (a) discussing the expansion of Unified Sports worldwide, (b) outlining the future directions of Unified Sports within the U.S., and (c) evaluating the philosophy of Unified Sports and its value to the Special Olympics movement.

At the conclusion of the Unified Sports Summit, a list of recommendations was developed concerning the redefinition of Unified Sports and its policies, specifically those concerning the rules of the game, eligibility criteria, training of coaches, and other operating principles. The recommendations emphasized the need to develop a global, strategic plan for Unified Sports, field-testing and evaluation of Unified Sports programs, and identification of model Unified Sports programs. As an outgrowth of the summit, the USLC created a standing sub-committee on Unified Sports in spring 1999.

In October 1999, the Special Olympics Board of Directors approved funding to conduct an external national assessment of Unified Sports. A request for proposals was released in February 2000. In response to the request for proposal, the Center for Social Development and Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston and the Department of Special Education at the University of Utah submitted a joint proposal to conduct a national evaluation of Unified Sports.

B. Purpose of the National Evaluation

The purpose of this national evaluation was to analyze the perceptions of key stakeholders (state directors^a, athletes, family members, partners, and coaches) regarding their commitment to the concept of Unified Sports, and their overall satisfaction with the Unified Sports Programs. Specifically, a multi-method and multi-source approach was used to provide information on (a) how effectively Unified Sports is presently being implemented; (b) its impact and value from the perspectives of athletes, families, and coaches; and (c) the program's overall contribution to the mission of Special Olympics. In conducting the study, the evaluation team

^a The term "state directors" includes the state executive director or the state director of sports.

sought to identify the “best practices” of various Unified Sports programs across the United States.

II. EVALUATION PROCEDURES

A. Overview

The primary aim of the national evaluation was to obtain an accurate “snapshot” of the status of Unified Sports. As such, the evaluation team employed a multi-method design. The methods included interviews of key stakeholders, surveys of program participants, observations at Unified Sports events, and reviews of existing documents. Both the evaluation team and the Advisory Committee determined that these methods would be the most effective means of gathering the requisite information. Employing multiple methods allowed the evaluation team to triangulate the data in an attempt to avoid any threats to validity and to present an accurate portrayal of the current status of Unified Sports within the U.S.

Given the descriptive nature of this evaluation, it was of the utmost importance that the evaluation team gathered as much data as possible from multiple sources. With the assistance of the Advisory Committee, the evaluation team identified the key stakeholders in Unified Sports and the existing data sources. Key stakeholders included state directors, athletes, partners, family members, and coaches. In addition to these sources, the evaluation team determined that the use of existing accreditation data and information from previous reviews and evaluations would also be important to better understand the administration and structure of Unified Sports programs around the country. Each identified source provided a unique perspective on Unified Sports and contributed significantly to the “holistic” nature of the evaluation.

Once the key methods and sources were identified, the evaluation team, in conjunction with the Advisory Committee, paired data collection methods with sources. This pairing was

accomplished by determining the best way of collecting data from each source in the most efficient manner. For example, it was determined that the perspective and experience of the state directors necessitated the use of personal telephone interviews, whereas coaches could provide information through self-administered questionnaires. With the pairing of sources and methods complete, the evaluation team developed the data collection instruments.

B. Development of Survey Instruments

The goal of the evaluation team was to construct questionnaires that tapped the unique perspectives of the participants. The questionnaires needed to be long enough to cover all of the critical aspects of a participant's perspective, but short enough to be "user-friendly" and not impede or detract from an individual's participation in the sporting events. Clearly, the athlete questionnaire needed to be designed such that the questions were at a level commensurate with the receptive and expressive language skills of individuals with mental retardation. To achieve these objectives, the evaluation team engaged in a range of activities from extensive literature reviews on the participation of individuals with mental retardation in sports to piloting instruments with representative samples.

Input from the Advisory Committee, members of the USLC, staff at SO headquarters, and consultation from experts in survey methodology played a central role in the development of the data collection instruments and protocols. Each questionnaire and protocol was submitted to the Advisory Committee for input, and was then pilot-tested for readiness and reliability. Each instrument was designed to gauge the satisfaction of key stakeholders with regard to Unified Sports, and to gather participant perceptions on the strengths and weaknesses of their respective local program. The seven stated aims of Unified Sports referred to earlier in this report were also taken into account during the development of the data collection tools.

Interview questionnaire for state directors. The state directors' interview format and open-ended questions went through a series of modifications as a result of pilot testing. The final interview questionnaire focused on specific aspects of the operations of Unified Sports at the state level, as well as several issues that had been the subject of much discussion at the USLC's subcommittee on Unified Sports. In particular, the questions dealt with issues concerning eligibility, rule modification, and the variability of the eligibility criteria and rule modifications across the different areas within the state. Additionally, several questions focused on state directors' perceptions of the degree of support for Unified Sports at the state and local levels. Specific questions addressed the degree to which staff at both levels supported Unified Sports, as well as what staff consider the positive and negative aspects of training and competition. Questions also focused on the directors' perceptions of support from SOI International Headquarters. Lastly, the interview included questions concerning the future of Unified Sports in terms of its stability over the next ten years at the state level, and its growth potential at the World Games.

Responses to the open-ended questions provided a unique view of Unified Sports. Most importantly, the information obtained from the directors allowed the evaluation team to place the perspectives of athletes, partners, family members, and coaches within the larger context of the state. *The final survey protocols for state directors are included in Appendix B of this report.*

Survey questionnaires for Unified Sports participants. Survey questionnaires for Unified Sports participants included open-ended questions, close-ended questions, questions using the Likert scale, and questions involving ranking/rating of goals and priorities. Open-ended questions assessed participants' likes and dislikes regarding Unified Sports, as well as their specific experiences as an athlete, partner, family member, or coach. Questions for the athletes

and partners focused on their relationships with other athletes and partners during sporting events, and in settings outside of Unified Sports (e.g. school, work, community, etc.). Several questions for athletes and partners addressed their self-perceptions in terms of the degree to which they felt their sports skills and self-confidence had improved. Questions specific to the partner addressed their assessment of their level of play in terms of competitiveness and their reactions to playing alongside athletes with mental retardation.

Questionnaires for family members and coaches focused on what they liked most and least about Unified Sports. Both family members and coaches were asked to indicate their goals and priorities for the athletes and partners. Parents were asked to judge their son or daughter's improvements in a range of areas (such as physical abilities and relationships with others). Lastly, both family members and coaches were asked about specific issues regarding the operations of Unified Sports, specifically issues of partner dominance, modification of rules, communication with staff, problems with transportation, etc. *The final survey protocols for Unified Sports participants are included in Appendix B of this report.*

C. Selection of Sites

The interviews for athletes, partners, family members, and coaches took place during a six-month period beginning in February 2001 and ending in August 2001. Given the limited resources available for this evaluation, decisions had to be made as to the feasibility of visiting a small, yet representative, number of specific states. An effort was made to choose a sample of states across geographic regions. Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Rhode Island were chosen in the East; Indiana and Wisconsin in the Midwest; Utah and Nevada in the West; and California on the West Coast. States were selected from four geographic regions on the basis of their population and the number of active Unified Sports programs. Sporting events were

selected on the basis of their popularity during the spring/summer seasons. Softball and volleyball were popular team sports, while bowling and golf were popular individual sports.

In addition to site visits in nine states, the evaluation team chose to attend two national Unified Sports tournaments as well. Given the popularity of bowling and volleyball with Unified Sports participants, the evaluation team attended the National Bowling Tournament held in Reno, Nevada and the National Volleyball Tournament held in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

It is important to point out that the site selection process was limited by several factors. First, by beginning the interview process in late winter, the evaluation team was restricted to indoor sporting events, such as the bowling tournament in Reno. Second, due to difficulties in arranging travel and hotels for local events, only events at the area, state, and regional levels were included in the interview pool. Finally, due to a conflict in scheduling sporting events during the summer months the evaluation team had to be selective. A number of states initially selected for participation held their state games on the same weekend; for example, on August 25, 2001 four states had scheduled state tournaments. Notwithstanding these restrictions, the evaluation team was still able to select a representative sample of sporting events at the national, regional, state, and area levels based on established criteria.

D. Procedures

State director interviews were conducted by the principal investigators and project director, and included at least one state director from every region of the country. Surveys were administered to athletes, partners, family members, and coaches by trained project interviewers. Participants at the sports events were chosen using convenience-sampling techniques, with a specific effort made to get a balanced sample among all four groups (athletes, family members, partners, and coaches) at each event. Surveys were also mailed out to coaches from around the

country, with a specific emphasis on the states where the evaluation team was unable to visit. There was approximately a 60% return rate on the mailed surveys from coaches.

Trained project personnel at various Unified Sports events around the country gathered observation data while also gathering participant surveys. Following each event, the project personnel sat down as a group and discussed their impressions and observations. Only observations with significant agreement across observers were included in the final analysis. Finally, the project director spent three days in Washington, DC. reviewing previously existing data (state files and past evaluations) in conjunction with key administrative personnel from Special Olympics Headquarters.

The majority of the data collected for this evaluation is of a qualitative or nominal/ordinal nature. The data were analyzed using several techniques. Quantitative data were analyzed using basic descriptive statistical procedures and simple frequencies. Qualitative data were analyzed through document review, qualitative data coding, and theme/pattern isolation techniques. The final results of the evaluation were reviewed and discussed by the entire evaluation team for accuracy and clarification purposes. A preliminary report was presented to the Special Olympics Research and Evaluation Committee for their approval and feedback in October 2001.

III. FINDINGS

Findings are organized into the following categories, each of which corresponds to the evaluation's data sources: (a) administration of the program at the national level, (b) administration of the program at the state level, c) athletes' participation in Unified Sports, (d) partners' participation in Unified Sports, (e) family member perspectives of Unified Sports, and (f) coaches' participation in Unified Sports. The evaluation team also conducted several cross-category comparisons in order to compare the goals and priorities across participants.

A. Administration of Unified Sports at the SO Headquarters Level

A key finding was an overall absence of “Unified Sports-specific” databases and tracking procedures at the national level. At the time of the evaluation, project staff were unable to locate standard reporting procedures for Unified Sports in the Special Olympics biannual accreditation process. Accreditation documents obtained from the national headquarters contained very little Unified Sports-specific information. As such, it was difficult to put together a clear picture of the Unified Sports program in specific states from the data reported in their respective accreditation files. The overall absence of information on Unified Sports in accreditation documents corroborates the perspective of state directors interviewed by the evaluation team. Directors suggested that the SO Headquarters was, for the most part, “neutral” in regard to the importance of Unified Sports programs around the country.

Through communications with various staff at SO Headquarters, the evaluation team also discovered that there is no standard means of tracking coaches and/or other participants in the program. As such, the evaluation team was unable to obtain the needed contact information on Unified Sports coaches in order to mail out the national survey questionnaire. Although the Headquarters office did have *some* general contact information on coaches, it was not helpful for the purposes of this evaluation because there was no way of distinguishing which coaches were involved with traditional SO programs and which coaches were involved with Unified Sports.

In addition to a lack of information on coaches involved with Unified Sports, there has been no system in place to track individual program participants. Although the accreditation procedure requires that each state submit the number of athletes who participate in any given sport, there is *no* distinction made between athletes who participate in traditional versus Unified Sports programs. The accreditation procedure does require states to report the number of Unified

Sports partners. However, there have been no standard criteria for determining how these numbers were reached. The overall absence of standardized, Unified Sports-specific reporting procedures makes program planning and evaluation difficult. The lack of data sets at the national level also has a significant effect on the perceptions and priorities of state staff. This, in turn, has a direct impact on the overall operation of Unified Sports in each state and local program.

B. Administration of Unified Sports at the State Level

State directors were a valuable source of information to the evaluation team, providing considerable insight into the operation of Unified Sports in their respective states. State directors who were supportive of Unified Sports placed equal importance on both traditional SO sports and Unified Sports, citing the need to provide options to program participants. The equal emphasis on both traditional sports and Unified Sports also provided insight into combining staff roles and budgetary patterns. Many state directors noted that Unified Sports has a greater potential for growth than traditional Special Olympics.

A key finding at the state level is that there is tremendous variability in the implementation of Unified Sports programs from state to state. Even within individual states, there is considerable variability between the area and local Unified Sports programs. Most state directors interviewed for this evaluation emphasized that the day-to-day functioning of the Unified Sports program is delegated to the local staff, thus creating variation between local areas. Using information collected from state directors, data from SO Headquarters, and participant input, the evaluation team identified several areas of variability across programs. These include: (a) rule modifications, (b) the definition and role of the partner, c) team composition, and d) opportunities for competition. These variations in program characteristics were most evident at national and state tournaments where participants gathered to compete. Through observations at

these tournaments and interviews with participants, it became evident that there was little program standardization at the state level.

Rule modifications. At state tournaments, it was common to see coaches from two teams discussing rule modifications with the officials. The majority of coaches interviewed described tournament play as “very difficult” because the accommodations or rule modifications made at the local level often had to be discarded in favor of a standard set of rules. Several coaches felt that this was unfair to their players.

Definitions and roles of the partner. There was considerable variability in the definition and role of the partner. While the evaluation team observed sporting events where eligibility of athletes and partners followed SO guidelines, such as a state softball tournament, there were instances in other tournaments where variations existed in the application of these guidelines. For example, at an area golf tournament, the partner was also seen as the coach, whereas at another state golf tournament, the partner was actually an equal player with the athlete and the “coach” was not allowed to participate. Similarly, several coaches noted that they could play as a partner on their team at a local level, but were not allowed to compete at the state or national level. At the national volleyball tournament in Milwaukee, this variability was clearly evident. The evaluation team noted that some teams had a “designated” coach who did not play, whereas another team’s head coach played while a partner sat out as a representative coach. The evaluation team also observed differences in the roles of the partners on the court. Some teams had partners who seemed to purposely avoid including the athletes during play, while other teams had partners who made a concerted effort to ensure that the athletes were an integral part of the team effort. When off the court, these same teams also displayed variability with the more inclusive teams’ partners accompanying the athletes to and from the venues and remaining with

the athletes during mealtimes and social functions. On other teams, partners would only associate with the athletes while on the court, and after the match athletes and partners would go their separate ways until their next scheduled game.

Team composition. At state and national level tournaments, teams with adolescent athletes and partners often competed against teams comprised of middle-age adults. Teams also varied in terms of gender. For example, all-male teams often competed against mixed-gender teams.

Opportunities for competition. This particular area of variability was evident in every data set analyzed for this evaluation. Some states provided year-round opportunities for Unified Sports participation, while others would only have a single Unified Sports tournament per year. At the local level, a common concern across state directors and program participants in some states, particularly those less populated, was the absence of leagues or multiple teams to compete against. Some Unified Sports teams were only able to compete against other Unified teams if they attended state or national tournaments. This limited their opportunities for competition to once or twice a year. On the other hand, there are some states with highly active Unified Sports programs that have multiple leagues and teams. Some of these leagues are associated with community recreation or school athletics programs, and the participants in these states cited multiple opportunities each week to train and compete against other Unified teams.

State directors who were supportive of Unified Sports also believed the program should be included in the World Games. Many of these directors suggested that the World Games provided an ideal opportunity for SO to showcase Unified Sports. Media coverage could be used more effectively to further break down the societal barriers between individuals with mental retardation and non-disabled peers. This perspective was tempered, however, by the strong

recommendation that if Unified Sports were included in the World Games, it should not eliminate any opportunity for athletes to participate by filling allotted slots with non-disabled partners.

C. Athletes' Participation in Unified Sports

This data set is comprised of 134 completed athlete surveys from 17 states (See Table 1^b). Athletes' mean age was 31 with 35% female respondents and 65% male respondents (See Table 2 for complete demographic information on athlete participants). Athletes indicated that their favorite sports were bowling, basketball, softball, and volleyball respectively. This finding is consistent with the data from the 2000 Global Athlete Census. One out of four athletes reported having a family member on their Unified Sports team.

Overall, athletes reported a very high level of satisfaction with their participation in Unified Sports.

- 96% felt good about themselves as a result of participating in Unified Sports;
- 90% would like to play in the Unified Sports program again next year;
- 98% enjoyed practices;
- 92% enjoyed games/competition;
- 98% of athletes had become better at their respective sports as a result of participating in Unified Sports.

An evaluation of the team dynamic revealed:

- 90% got along with all of the partners on their team;
- 94% enjoyed being with their teammates;
- 91% would recommend Unified Sports to a friend.

^b All tables in this section may be found in Appendix A.

When asked what they liked most about Unified Sports, athletes overwhelmingly cited the social aspects of Unified Sports such as camaraderie and “being with the team” (See Table 3). The second most often cited positive aspect of Unified Sports identified that it was “fun.”

Although athlete perceptions were overwhelmingly positive, there were also a few areas of concern. First, 30% of athletes reported that they did not get enough playing time. A further probe suggests that this could be related to two things: local opportunities for competition and/or partners dominating playing time on the team. A second area of concern is that 18% of athletes reported that they do not have a choice between playing on a Unified Sports team versus a traditional Special Olympics team. This finding correlates with the fact that 23% of athletes did not know that they had a choice between traditional SO and Unified Sports. These last two findings are inconsistent with the interview data from state directors who reported that choice between traditional and Unified is central to the SO program. The precise rationale for why athletes felt they had no choice was not evident from the data gathered for this evaluation.

D. Partners’ Participation in Unified Sports

For this evaluation, 145 partners were surveyed from 16 states (See Table 1). The general partner demographic data are included in Table 2. Of the partners who participated in the evaluation, 24% were related to a family member on their team; 36% were related to another partner on their team; and only 10% reported having a disability other than mental retardation.

Overall, partners were very satisfied with their experience in Unified Sports:

- 97% felt good about themselves as a result of participating in Unified Sports;
- 96% would highly recommend Unified Sports to a friend;
- 96% would like to play in the Unified Sports program again next year.

Like the athletes, partners reported generally positive experiences as a team member:

- 97% enjoyed being with their teammates;
- 99% got along with the athletes on their team;
- 96% got along with the other partners on their teams.

One of the more significant findings is that 93% of partners reported that they had gained a better understanding of individuals with mental retardation as a result of their experience in Unified Sports.

Additionally, 99% of partners enjoyed the competition in Unified Sports “a lot,” and 91% felt that Unified Sports was somewhat competitive to very competitive. More than 90% felt that they got enough playing time. Although partners enjoyed the games and competitions, 21% reported that they did not enjoy training or practices. As a corollary, 16% felt that they had not improved in their respective sport or skills as a result of participating in Unified Sports.

Whereas athletes had very few negative comments regarding Unified Sports, a significant number of partners had at least some concerns with the program. The most commonly cited concern was partner dominance during competitions. Many partners addressed the issue of “overly competitive partners” or “partners who played for themselves” on other teams. However, domination was *not* an issue for partners on their respective team.

The most commonly reported positive program attributes were social aspects, helping others, and fun, respectively (See Table 3). This finding, with the exception of the “helping others” criterion, is an exact match with the positive program attributes reported by athletes. It suggests that both athletes and partners view socializing and fun as far more important than the competitive aspects of Unified Sports. This is consistent with the stated aims of Unified Sports to

break down the social barriers between individuals with mental retardation and those without disabilities.

E. Family Member Perspectives of Unified Sports

The evaluation sample included 89 family members from 16 states. Family members included in this evaluation were mothers, fathers, and guardians of athletes who participated in Unified Sports. The general demographic data for family members are contained in Table 4. Family members were, in general, more critical of the Unified Sports program than athletes or partners. However, the majority was still very satisfied with their son's or daughter's experience. Of the family members surveyed, 43% reported that they had participated as a partner on a Unified Sports team; 31% had been volunteers at an SO event; and 25% had coached a Unified Sports team at some time in the past. This high level of program involvement is consistent with the stated aims of Unified Sports to provide family members the opportunity to compete alongside their athletes.

Most family members surveyed indicated their athlete was very active in Unified Sports:

- 66% reported that their athlete had participated in two or more Unified Sports within the past year;
- 41% reported that their athlete had competed in Unified Sports at the national level;
- 49% of family members reported that their athlete had competed at the state level.

On average, family members reported that their athletes attended nine practices or training sessions and two competitions within the past year.

The overall satisfaction level of family member was quite high:

- 93% were satisfied with their athlete's overall experience in Unified Sports;
- 98% would recommend Unified Sports to another family;

- 91% felt that Unified Sports coaches were *at least* adequate in their ability to coach athletes with mental retardation;
- 61% felt that the coaches' abilities to work with athletes with mental retardation was excellent.

When asked about the direct effect of Unified Sports on their athlete's development, most family members reported seeing some improvement in one or more areas (See Table 5). Families perceived the most improvement in physical abilities, self-esteem/self-confidence, and relationships with fellow athletes. Family members also saw significant improvements in the areas of adaptive behaviors, relationships with peers at school or work, relationships with parents and siblings, and relationships with other adults. These particular findings also support the overall purpose of Unified Sports to provide benefit outside the competitive arena.

When asked what they liked most about Unified Sports, 50% of family members reported "the social aspects of Unified Sports" (See Table 6). This pattern is consistent with athlete and partner data regarding the positive effects of the Unified Sports program. Next to the social aspects, families liked the educational emphasis (e.g. teaching tolerance, social skills, etc.). Fun and competition ranked third among the families surveyed.

When asked what they like least about the Unified Sports program, one out of four cited the lack of dedicated and knowledgeable partners (See Table 7). This finding seems to suggest a high turnover rate among partners. The second most commonly cited concern was partner dominance. By combining concerns over turnover and dominance, 43% of family members mentioned the role of the partner as a problem area. In a related survey item, 30% of family members reported having problems with partner dominance at some point during their experience with Unified Sports.

In addition to the above, several other issues also require attention. For example, 29% of families indicated that they did not have a choice regarding their participation in Unified Sports. Although this finding is consistent with the data reported by the athletes, it is not consistent with the interviews with state directors who emphasized the importance of program choice. Another issue is transportation to and from trainings and competitions. One out of four of the families surveyed had a concern in the area of training and/or competitions.

F. Coaches' Participation in Unified Sports

Coaches in Unified Sports were an extremely valuable source of information for the purposes of this evaluation. Their intimate knowledge of the programs and their experience were critical to the evaluation team's understanding of Unified Sports at the local level. The evaluation sample consisted of 60 coaches from 11 states (See Table 1). The mean years of experience for coaches in the sample was 6.3 years. Coaches were involved with an average of three sports each (See Table 8). Of the coaches surveyed, 92% also coached traditional SO, and had done so for an average of 10 years. Nearly six out of 10 (58%) also reported that they were a family member of an athlete or partner in Unified Sports. Although somewhat inconsistent with the data reported by family members, sampling techniques were slightly different. (Many coaches received mailed surveys, while family members were sampled on a convenience basis at Unified Sports events.)

The findings from the coaches survey suggested a very dedicated and experienced group of individuals. Nearly eight out of 10 (78%) reported that they coached Unified Sports for personal satisfaction. Four out of ten (40%) reported that they coached because they were a family member of an athlete or a partner. In regard to training level, 83% had received some type of Unified Sports-specific training. Nearly every coach (98%) felt that their ability to coach

athletes and partners on the same team was *at least* adequate; 64% rated their coaching abilities as excellent. This finding is consistent with family members who indicated a high degree of satisfaction with coaches' general abilities. Finally, 77% of coaches felt that partners and athletes made equal contributions to the overall success of the team.

When asked about their general priorities for athletes, coaches overwhelmingly reported an emphasis on improved self-esteem and self-confidence (See Table 9). This is consistent with family member priorities. Families view improved adaptive behavior and improved friendships as equally important, while coaches report improved sports skills as their second priority.

Coaches and families both cite “fun” as being the most important priority during competition (See Table 11). Family members felt that camaraderie and sportsmanship were second in importance, while coaches focused on teamwork and sportsmanship as their next highest priorities. Clearly, there is a high degree of agreement among families and coaches on the intended outcomes of Unified Sports.

An interesting finding from the coaches is that only 63% indicated that they had *some* role in determining the eligibility of athletes; 72% reported at least *some* role in determining the eligibility of partners. These data are somewhat inconsistent with state directors who emphasized that day-to-day administrative decisions were made by the local-level Unified Sports programs. It would seem that if the local staff were indeed responsible for the daily operation of the Unified Sports program in their area, coaches would generally feel empowered to have more of a role in decisions regarding the eligibility of program participants.

Related to the decision-making role of coaches, the evaluation showed that 58% believe it is necessary to make rule modifications (See Table 12A). Of the coaches who made rule modifications, the most commonly reported reason was to “increase the opportunity for athlete

participation” (71%). This was followed by ensuring “athlete safety” (65%) and then “to accommodate an athlete’s or partner’s skills” (50%) (See Table 12B). This finding was corroborated with the concerns expressed by family members and partners regarding partner domination and “over-competitiveness.” Only 35% of coaches said that they had made rule modifications to deal with partner dominance, despite the fact that on another survey question 53% reported that they have had concerns with partner dominance in the past. Given concerns from coaches, family members, and partners regarding domination, it was expected that a higher percentage of coaches would make rule modifications to deal with this issue.

Coaches were also asked to identify several perceived problem areas relative to their local Unified Sports program. The most common problems identified were (a) recruiting appropriate partners (59%), (b) transportation to and from practices and games (59%), (c) athlete attendance at practices and games (56%), and (d) partner attendance at practices and games (47%) (See Table 10). These data are again consistent with earlier findings in that coaches reflect the concern of family members regarding the recruitment of knowledgeable and dedicated partners, as well as transportation.

Approximately 23% of coaches indicated that the financial resources available to them were less than adequate. Given the pattern of budget reporting at the state level, as discussed in the previous section, it was impossible for the evaluation team to make any judgments regarding the amount of resources any particular area was allotted. However, one pattern that did arise during the interviews with state level staff was that many state programs only conduct fund-raising at a state level. In many states, local level programs are not directly involved with fund-raising activities. This may lead to the perception of local staff that there are no options for obtaining additional funds if they see a potential need.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This descriptive study has provided a unique opportunity to better understand Unified Sports from the perspectives of key stakeholders: state directors, athletes, family members, partners, and coaches. From the responses to the questionnaires and personal one-to-one interviews, the evaluation team gained an understanding of the effectiveness of Unified Sports in fulfilling the mission of Special Olympics. First and foremost, it can be unequivocally stated that Unified Sports has a positive impact on all participants. In particular, both athletes and partners enjoy participating in Unified Sports, feel that it has helped them improve their sports skills and self-confidence, and, most importantly, given them the overall opportunity to socialize. Further, partners indicate that they have gained a better understanding of mental retardation and have enjoyed participating with their teammates, particularly the athletes with mental retardation. These are the areas of impact that are, in fact, the shared goals of family members and coaches

It is also clear that the growth of Unified Sports programs in the various states participating in the evaluation have been heavily influenced by the commitment and attitude of state and SO Headquarters staff. There are states with thriving Unified Sports programs because of highly committed and active directors. At the same time, other states have directors who see Unified Sports as a program that can potentially funnel resources away from athletes in SO. Regardless of the level of commitment at the state level, all directors perceive SO Headquarters as “neutral.” This overall perception of SO Headquarters is perpetuated by a lack of communication, guidance, and oversight. The lack of procedural and administrative focus may have inadvertently led to a generalized ambivalence toward Unified Sports on the part of some state staff.

There was no standardized procedure for implementing or evaluating Unified Sports programs at the Headquarters level. As such, there is considerable variability around key aspects of program implementation at state and local levels. One example of the variability is around the definition and role of the partner. The variability in partners was observed by the evaluation team at several events around the country, as well as from interviews with partners. All of the data point to the fact that the concept of “partner” is difficult to implement consistently at state and local events.

The issues surrounding the “definition of partner” and the accompanying problems with partner recruitment and “partner dominance” have been continually debated by USLC’s Subcommittee on Unified Sports. The debate over how “partner” is defined can be expected given that “inclusion,” in the broad sense, has been a continually changing concept, and that left to their own devices, states have interpreted the whole notion of inclusion in either very narrow or very broad terms. On many teams, the partner is considered to be any individual without mental retardation, including a parent, sibling, director of a sheltered workshop, social caseworker, volunteer, etc. In other instances, the partner is, as defined by the mission of Unified Sports, of similar age and similar ability to the athlete. While the peer-dynamic between athlete and partner is considered optimal in the eyes of Unified Sports, the evaluation team found that the satisfaction level of athletes, partners, and family members did not seem to be tied to “who is the partner.” A Unified Sports “Father and Son” golf tournament is equally satisfying as a similar age-similar ability athlete and partner softball game. In the words of the athletes, regardless of who is the partner, being on a Unified Sports team is like “being on a regular team,” “it’s being with everyone.” As such, these examples point out that the satisfaction of participants at the local

level may be more related to the flexibility of the definition of partner than to the strict adherence to eligibility criteria.

External factors relate to the general philosophy of inclusion in a given state or local area. In states where the philosophy of inclusion is strong, Unified Sports is seen as a positive choice for families and athletes in Special Olympics. However, there is less support for Unified Sports in those states in which Special Olympics staff perceive inclusion to have mild support at the local and state levels. The perspectives of state level staff regarding Unified Sports in relation to Special Olympics vary according to their philosophical support for inclusion and conception of traditional Special Olympics. State-level staff view Unified Sports in one of two ways: as contributing to the mission of SO, or as detracting from the original mission of the traditional program. This distraction is based upon the perception that partners take away “slots” from athletes at National and World Games.

In conclusion, as an official part of Special Olympics for more than two decades, Unified Sports has developed into a program with wide appeal for athletes and their families at the local level. In doing so, it has also become a local program characterized by considerable flexibility in the application of the official sports rules and eligibility criteria that guide its implementation. The findings of this evaluation suggest that there is a positive relationship between this flexibility and the high satisfaction levels found among participants.

The present findings create a conundrum for key stakeholders as they plan for the future of Unified Sports. While flexibility in the application of rules (e.g., partner eligibility) has contributed to participant satisfaction at the local level, it has also impeded the ability of Unified athletes and their teams to advance to state, national, and world competitions. Evidence of this was found in interviews with coaches who indicated they were having difficulty adjudicating

rules that were being applied differently from one local area to another when teams advanced to state and National Games.

In planning for the future of Unified Sports, key stakeholders will have to balance what appear to be inherently different objectives: maintaining participant satisfaction at the local level by allowing flexibility in the application of official sports rules and eligibility criteria, while at the same time expanding the growth potential of Unified Sports through team participation at national and world competition levels. Clearly, if Unified Sports is to continue to grow and eventually achieve a stature comparable to that of traditional Special Olympics programs, then increasing numbers of Unified Sports athletes and their teams must be able to compete at state, National, and World Games.

If the decision is to “grow” Unified Sports and work toward a consistent application of the program across states, the following recommendations are put forth:

1. The value and importance of Unified Sports needs to be more clearly communicated at every level of organization. To accomplish this, staff at SO Headquarters should be appointed with specific responsibilities for overseeing the growth and quality of Unified Sports.
2. Support is needed from SO Headquarters in developing a data management system that would monitor the participation of both athletes and partners in Unified Sports activities. The data generated could be used as a component of the state accreditation procedures.
3. The mission of Unified Sports should be reviewed, specifically in terms of its definition of “partner.” The concept of athletes and partners being of similar age and similar ability needs to be reconsidered on a sport-by-sport basis.

4. Clear incentives are needed for state programs to provide athletes and their families with a choice – Unified Sports and/or traditional Special Olympics.
5. A minimum set of standards should be established for Unified Sports in each of the 50 states. As part of an incentive to meet these standards, “partners” should be counted in the Special Olympics database with a specific designation.
6. Guidelines and incentives for the participation of Unified Sports teams in the World Games are needed. Unified Sports must not be seen as diluting the efforts of Special Olympics, but instead as a way to strengthen Special Olympics in its overall mission.
7. There is a need for an increased effort on the part of state offices to reach out to parents, helping them to better understand the mission and opportunities available within Unified Sports. Parents need to know they have clear choices within the family of Special Olympics programs. There is also a need for SO Headquarters, working in cooperation with state offices, to reach out to education and recreation communities and present the benefits of Unified Sports for both athletes and partners.