



Special Olympics

COACHING GUIDE

Coaching Special Olympics Athletes

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Introduction

Special Olympics is committed to coaching excellence. The most important thing to know as a coach in Special Olympics is that your athletes are individuals, and coaching them is just like coaching any other youth or community sports team. The skills that make successful coaches are the same whether you are coaching National Olympic teams, High School or University teams, community sports clubs or youth teams or Special Olympics teams. But we recognize that there are some situations that make Special Olympics coaching unique (and thus more enjoyable!).

This section is designed to provide tools for recognizing coaching situations and opportunities that may be unique to the Special Olympics coaching environment. At the end of this section, we have provided some tables that other coaches have found helpful in planning or adjusting practice strategies to help athletes and coaches alike become more successful.

In addition to the resources found here, many Special Olympics Programs offer occasional workshops for coaches on this subject. Please visit our program locator at http://www.specialolympics.org/Special+Olympics+Public+Website/English/Program_Locator/default.htm to see when the next Coaching Special Olympics Athletes Workshop is scheduled in your Special Olympics Program.

This section is divided into four parts

1. Frequently Asked Questions

- What do I need to know about the athlete with intellectual disability?
- What are the mental, psychological and social considerations I should be aware of?
- How can I train and coach athletes more positively and more successfully to improve their performance and behavior?
- Is there a specific training plan I should follow for the season or can I be creative?
- How does an individual with intellectual disabilities learn sport skills and rules, and what can a coach do to facilitate learning (training sequence, levels of instruction)?

2. What to Expect From the Athletes

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- Description of Common Behaviors and Recommended Accommodations
- Intellectual Disability and Other Closely Related Developmental Disabilities
- Athlete Behavior Characteristics and Strategies to Improve Learning

Coaching Special Olympics Athletes

Frequently Asked Questions

Part I: Frequently Asked Questions

These are some of the questions asked most frequently by coaches new to Special Olympics:

What do I need to know about the athlete with intellectual disability (mental retardation)?

The term “mental retardation” means that someone learns more slowly than other people their age. That’s it! The term “intellectual disability” is gaining acceptance internationally as an alternative to the more clinical mental retardation. In Special Olympics, you may hear either term. The important thing to remember is that NO ONE wants to be known by a label—Special Olympics athletes included.

There is no other description or expectation other than learning slower that applies to the entire population. You can count on the fact that Special Olympics athletes are people who have been identified as someone who learns slower; beyond that, they are just like everyone else, individuals with unique challenges, talents, abilities and interests. Enjoy getting to know them.

What are the mental, psychological and social considerations I should be aware of?

Each athlete will have completed a Medical Release form. It will note if there are any restrictions on activity, medications that may affect performance or unique situations. Other than that, they are just like everyone else.

The best advice we can give you as a coach is to look beyond the disability to see the person, and then trust your instincts on the psychological and social situations. If you sense that someone is left out or feels lonely, you are probably right. Ask that person how they think things are going and if they are having fun.

As noted above, if there are significant psychological or social disabilities that have been diagnosed, you will see them noted on the medical release forms. Be sure you see those forms before the athletes arrive for the first practice.

How can I train and coach athletes more positively and more successfully to improve their performance and behavior?

Look below for the comments on expectations, dignity and respect. At Special Olympics, we are always looking for ways to support volunteers and coaches with new training and resources. Keep an eye on the Special Olympics Web site, www.SpecialOlympics.org “Coach” section, for updated tips and to ask questions of our sport specific advisors.

Check out the Principles of Coaching section of this guide for tips on effective coaching.

There is also an organization specifically dedicated to developing positive coaching skills. Check it out at www.positivecoachingalliance.org.

Is there a specific training plan I should follow for the season or can I be creative?

This depends on your local, area, state or national Special Olympics Program and the sport you are coaching. Some Programs have established seasons and competition expectations and some sports have specific routines (figure skating and gymnastics, for example) that must be consistent for competition to be fair. Please check with your Program’s Area Director.

How does an individual with an intellectual disability learn sport skills and rules, and what can a coach do to facilitate learning (training sequence, levels of instruction)?

People with an intellectual disability learn just like everyone else. They use different strategies and strengths to help them understand. Some learn best through seeing things, others through hearing things. Some need to feel what it is like to do something before they can learn it. The only difference with Special Olympics athletes is that they will most likely be slower to learn it than their peers.

Repetition is a proven strategy for learning that is effective with everyone. It can also be effective with Special Olympics athletes. Another strategy is to “tell them, show them, help them and remind them.”

Bottom line: No one strategy works for everyone. Be creative and have fun. That is the best environment for learning to happen.

Check out the Principles of Coaching section of this guide for more information on learning styles and effective strategies. There are also some quick reference guides in this section to help you.

Part II: What To Expect From The Athletes

Learning Considerations (Motivation; Perception; Comprehension; Memory)

Motivation: We all learn faster when we want to. It is important to help athletes (this would be any athlete, not just the Special Olympics athlete) see how much fun they will have once they master what you are teaching. Factors that may affect motivation include the athletes' reasons for coming to practice. Is it because they asked to be there? Did someone else sign them up? Do they feel comfortable that they know this sport? Or is it a new experience for them? While it may be helpful to know the answers to all those questions, your task as a coach remains the same: No matter what the motivation was for coming to the first practice, make the reason for coming to the second practice the fun and sense of success they felt at the first one.

Medical Considerations (Down Syndrome; Medications; Seizures; Physical Disabilities; Fetal Alcohol Syndrome)

All of these terms are defined in the table at the end of this section titled Intellectual Disability and Other Related Developmental Disabilities. The most important things to remember regarding these issues are safety, dignity and expectations.

- Safety is dealt with by talking to parents, guardians and athletes themselves about what you should be aware of. You are not expected to be a physician, just use common sense. Be sure to read the required Special Olympics Medical Release Form so you will know if there are restrictions on activity.
- Dignity is an easy thing to deny or to give. The best gauge of ability comes from talking to your athletes about what they like, how they feel during a workout or what they want to accomplish in this sport. When you talk to athletes, labels like Down syndrome, FAS, or "seizure prone" become less necessary.
- Expectations come from many sources. You will set expectations for your athletes. They will set them for themselves. Their families may have expectations about what they can or cannot do. As a coach, you need to set expectations that will challenge and push your athletes, then design workouts to help them meet those expectations. Be aware of restrictions that are noted on the Medical Release Form, but don't let them define the athlete.

Social Considerations (Social Skills; Physical Recreation at Home; Economic Status)

All of these issues and their challenges are part of any athlete's reality, including a Special Olympics athlete. Where there are challenges in social skills, fitness, economic status or nutrition habits at home, you simply adjust the tools you use to help athletes meet expectations.

Part III: What To Expect From Yourself As The Coach

The role of the Special Olympics coach is much the same as any other volunteer coach in the community. There is an expectation that the coach will know something about the sport and how to teach it. This expectation varies with the skill level of the athletes and the environments in which the coaching takes place. If you have attended a Special Olympics Coaches Certification Workshop, you have the basics. If you haven't been to one?go.

There are a few aspects of Special Olympics coaching that are unique to the Program. As a Special Olympics coach, there is an expectation that you will:

Help athletes select appropriate sport(s) and levels of participation

Many of our athletes come to their first practice with very little knowledge of various sports. Because of this, you will need to help them become familiar with their options. If an athlete shows up for summer track practice and is clearly not interested in any aspect of running, jumping or throwing (or going to the meets with his/her friends), talk to the athlete to determine if there are other sports in which he/she might be interested (for example, (bowling or swimming).

Another challenge is to help athletes select events within a sport. What level of gymnastics will provide a challenge as well as success? Which athletics events will they enjoy the most and thus learn more quickly? The challenge here is a balance between pushing athletes to grow while not setting them up for frustration.

Offer a range of activities/events for all ability levels

When most people think of coaching Special Olympics athletes, they assume that all athletes will have the same, lower ability level. This is not usually the case. The average Special Olympics team will include athletes who have very limited exposure to a sport and athletes who have been playing for years, perhaps even in integrated sports programs in the community. Setting up practices will be much easier once you know the ability of each athlete. Then you can build workouts to meet everyone's needs.

Examples of dealing with different ability levels

- Ask more experienced athletes to help teach skills to new athletes.
- Split the athletes into two groups: an independent group and one that you work more closely with.
- Set up stations at practice, but set individual goals depending on the skill level of each athlete (for example, dribbling drill where a number of athletes simply go through the course, others do it for time, while still others do it with specific techniques for time, etc.)

Provide safe training and competition opportunities

This is no different from any other coaching situation, but it is important to always remember. This population is more than twice as likely as their peers to experience abuse (physical, sexual or emotional). Keeping a protective eye out for signs of abuse or potential for becoming a victim is a sign of a good coach. Special Olympics provides Protective Behaviors Training for coaches, volunteers and athletes. If you have not seen these materials, request them from your local or area director.

Conduct High Quality Training and Competition

Another misconception is that because this is Special Olympics, the expectation of quality is less. This is not true. We intend for Special Olympics athletes to experience the highest quality training and competition possible. To achieve this, we continually revamp training workshops and materials to support our volunteers and coaches. Special Olympics strives to be a resource to every community, both in the programs we offer to people with intellectual disabilities and in the sport training resources available to our volunteers and coaches.

Coaching Special Olympics Athletes What To Expect From Yourself As The Coach

Involve families and/or other support groups

Anything worth doing is worth getting help in doing. Families come to Special Olympics with a wide range of expectations and interests. Some look to Special Olympics as a respite opportunity. Others would like to only be involved by coming to the competitions and cheering. Still others seek more active roles as assistants or coaches themselves. All of these are acceptable and a part of the “team experience.”

The more effectively you find ways to include families in the team experience, the easier the season will become. Families are like athletes; each is unique. You shouldn't try to make assumptions about their potential for support based on anything but personal experience with each

Assist athletes to becoming integrated into the overall community

While some athletes will already be active in many aspects of their communities, others may turn to Special Olympics to provide a safe place to learn sports and social skills that will assist them in more inclusive settings. You won't have to work hard at this part of your coaching experience. It frequently just happens, or happens with family support. As a cautionary note: not every athlete sees community integration as a desirable goal. Some athletes view Special Olympics as their “safe place,” where they don't have the same concerns about “being different” as they have in some integrated settings. Other athletes enjoy the freedom of going back and forth between Special Olympics and community or school sports programs because they have different friends or goals in each group. Still others see Special Olympics as a place to learn skills so they can make the leap to integrated sports programs. Regardless of the goals, you will want to honor the athletes' goals first!

Ways to support athletes in attaining their goals related to integration:

- Help them register for community sports competitions during your season.
- Talk with them about what their goals are and how you might help.
- Set up some Unified Sports experiences to determine if that might be a logical next step.

Part IV: Information and Problem Solving

Description of Common Behaviors and Recommended Accommodations

Oral Expression

They may	Accommodations
Speak only in single word statements or phrases	If you understand what they mean - great! If you do not understand, ask them to say it differently
Exhibit word retrieval problems and substitute words for words they are having trouble retrieving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help them calm down and relax so they can find the words they want • Come up with “signs” for common requests or concerns
Exhibit bizarre patterns of language usage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It may be bizarre to you but make perfect sense to the athlete. • Explain that you are having trouble understanding what they mean. Get a conversation going - the give and take should make their intent more clear
Imitate or repeat words incorrectly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The accommodation is only necessary if you do not understand. • If that is the case, ask them to pick a different word to tell you what they mean.
Use gestures as a substitute for a word	Learn what the signs or gestures mean.
Have difficulty relating ideas in sequence	Break down sequences into steps and learn them individually; then put them together after the steps have been mastered.
Have difficulty making self understood to peers	If one peer does not understand, ask others if they understand and would be willing to help “translate.”
Contribute to discussion with off-task comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Again, it may seem “off task” to you but very on task to the athlete. • Ask them how their comment fits the discussion. They will explain it, give insight into their thinking or realize that they were off the topic.
Confuse words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help them use the correct term. • Be patient; give them an opportunity to formalize ideas.

Coaching Special Olympics Athletes Information and Problem Solving

Listening Comprehension

They may	Accommodations
Ask that questions be repeated	Repeat them. If it starts to take too much time, pair the athlete with another athlete who can provide modeling.
Often say “what,” or “huh,” etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check for hearing issues. • Switch from verbal instruction to visual demonstration of the task.
Confuse the meaning of similar sounding words	Explain the difference between the words and try visual techniques instead of auditory.
Fail to follow verbal directions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have them repeat directions back to you to verify understanding. • If failure to follow directions creates distractions for other athletes, have the athlete sit out or work with an assistant coach until you can determine the reason for not following original directions.
Do the opposite of the given instructions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have them repeat directions back to you to verify understanding. • If failure to follow directions creates distractions for other athletes, have the athlete sit out or work with an assistant coach until you can determine the reason for not following original directions. • Make sure you are stating the direction as a “positive” statement, such as, “Dribble all the way to the basket and shoot a lay-up,” as opposed to, “Never dribble all the way to the basket and then NOT shoot a lay-up!”
Have difficulty locating the direction of sounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Switch to visual cues • Set up a physical reaction to the sound no matter where it comes from. For example, “When you hear my whistle, stop and look at the sideline.”
Answer questions inappropriately	Establish that they understood the question by restating the question with their answer and then asking if that was what they meant to say.
Confuse time concepts (before/after)	Switch to physical (Kinesthetic) mode so that the end of one action leads to the next and will “feel” right. Like what is supposed to happen next.
Confuse direction words (front/back)	Instead of saying, “Go to the top of the key,” say, “Come and stand right here,” so they have a visual and physical way to remember.

Listening Comprehension, continued

They may	Accommodations
Ask irrelevant questions	Make sure you understood the question, or what they were really asking. You may not understand at first, so ask them to help you understand the question.
Show increased difficulty in any of the above areas when noise increases	Make a rule that it must be quiet when you are talking, and explain that it is because some athletes won't be able to understand if it is noisy. "Let's all help each other have the best chance to learn this skill!"

Attention Skills

They may	Accommodations
Fail to finish	Provide reward via praise or the right to move on once a task is completed.
Seem easily distracted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep them busy using a variety of short tasks. • Be quick with praise and give it often.
Appear not to listen	Touch them on the shoulder and ask if they understand what to do.
Have difficulty concentrating on tasks requiring sustained attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Break skills down into smaller tasks, and • Keep instruction time limited so they move more quickly from one activity to the next. • Teach as you do it with them.
Appear to act before thinking (impulse control issue)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pair them with another athlete who can act as a screener for the impulse. • Deep breaths help them slow down to focus and help you calm down as well!
Shift excessively from one activity to another	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up rewards for mastering a skill before moving on. • Ask them to teach the skill to another athlete who is having trouble. This keeps them focused on someone else's action and not on their desire to move on.
Have difficulty awaiting turns in games	Outline the schedule so they understand expectations.

Attention Skills, continued

They may	Accommodations
Excessively run about to climb on things	Help organize activities/limit materials if feasible.
Have difficulty staying seated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There should not be a lot of sitting during a sports practice. • Have activities set up so that the minute they arrive they have something to start on. “The first thing you should do when you get to practice is get a ball and shoot five baskets from each of these blue Xs.”

Social Perception

They may	Accommodations
Make inappropriate comments	Depends on the nature of the comments. If it is disruptive or makes other athletes uncomfortable, have them sit out or move to work with an assistant until you can explain that this is hurting their teammates.
Make inappropriate use of personal space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do a warm up drill that establishes an arm’s length; talk about giving everyone space. • Have partners shake hands and remind everyone that hand-shake distance is usually best for talking. Any closer and people get nervous and can’t focus on what you are saying.
Have difficulty anticipating behavior in others	Repetition via drills will help in learning patterns of actions.
Have difficulty in changing behavior	Reward and praise positive behavior and changes. Notice and comment on improvements no matter how slight.
Appear to be inflexible	Make every action a choice. Say, “Do you want to join the group over here or do you want to join the group over there?” Try to avoid “or else” comments.
Difficulty responding to non-verbal cues, hand gestures, facial expressions	Experiment with different cues and have them decide which ones work best for them.

Accommodations for persons with physical challenges

- ♦ Adapt rules—always clarify to the entire group
- ♦ Invite them to be involved with decision making on adaptations
- ♦ Always make sure the person with a physical disability is positioned to see and hear instructions
- ♦ Educate everyone involved in wheelchair safety issues
- ♦ Explore other roles: for example, scorekeeper/manager/coach

Coaching Special Olympics Athletes Information and Problem Solving

Intellectual Disability and Other Closely Related Developmental Disabilities

At times, you may see or hear the following terms to describe something about an athlete. These terms describe traits, or conditions, but they do not describe the person. There are very few traits or characteristics that are true for all people with any label.

Disability	Characteristics	Best 3 Strategies to Affect Learning
Intellectual Disability (General)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information processing and learning occurs at a slower rate; attention span is short • This was noticed for the first time before the person turned 18. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Train for short periods of time 2. Provide repetition (key to athlete gaining new skill development) 3. When training, think of athletes as literal thinkers
Autism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication difficulties • “In their own world,” but frequently aware and bright 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Craves established routines 2. Signal transition, change, loud noises, etc. 3. Provide highly structured and least distracting environment
Cerebral Palsy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor muscle control • Does not necessarily indicate intellectual disability • Difficulty with speech articulation 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Work on strengthening muscles 2. Teach skills in isolation to help build muscles 3. Develop gross motor skills
Down Syndrome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anywhere from moderate to significant intellectual disability • Genetic cause • Make sure you know about atlanto-axial instability before you do a drill that puts pressure on the neck or head. About 10 percent of people with Down syndrome have weakened vertebrae. The information will be on the medical release. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Set clear expectations and limits 2. Use eye contact when talking; work one-on-one to demonstrate new skill (gain full attention) 3. Use repetition and review
Fetal Alcohol Syndrome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tends to have attention and memory deficits. • Finds it difficult to stay on task. • Has difficulty in remembering what was previously learned 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Create routine 2. Set rules and limits 3. Reinforce acceptable behaviors
Fragile X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elongated face • Prone to seizures • Coordination difficulties 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide structured and predictable activities 2. Provide minimal auditory and visual stimulations 3. Establish routine and structure
Prader Willi	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleep disturbance • Compulsive eating • Skin picking 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Signal and practice transition 2. Set firm rules and expectations 3. Establish routine and structure

Athlete Behavior Characteristics and Strategies to Improve Learning

The goal of this chart is to provide coaches with information about Special Olympics athletes with different functional and learning characteristics (not labels) so that coaches can teach and coach Special Olympics athletes more effectively. When an athlete exhibits what is generally perceived as inappropriate behaviors, those behaviors may simply be a reflection or part of the person. Inappropriate behaviors that will not be tolerated include defiance, acting out or silliness.

When possible, talk with parents, providers, teachers, former coaches, etc., about an athlete's characteristics and the successful strategies used to affect learning. Use the characteristics as a checklist. Ensure that one or more of the strategies opposite the respective characteristics are employed in each practice.

Athlete Characteristics	Strategies to Improve Learning
<input type="checkbox"/> Learning occurs at a slower rate	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide structure 2. Provide repetition and review 3. Break down skills into smaller parts
<input type="checkbox"/> Short attention span	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Train for short periods of time 2. Provide repetition and review (key to gaining new skill) 3. Work one-on-one (gain full attention)
<input type="checkbox"/> Resistance to change	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide clear and continuous transitions 2. Establish routines (enforce concept of flexibility) 3. Build on successes
<input type="checkbox"/> Stubborn/Behavior problems	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Set clear rules, expectations and limits 2. Enforce rules but provide conditions for coming back 3. Reinforce acceptable behaviors
<input type="checkbox"/> Verbal communication difficulties or not at all	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Allow for additional time to express thoughts 2. Use picture boards/other assistive devices 3. Ask him or her to demonstrate or show what he/she means
<input type="checkbox"/> Prone to seizures	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Know signs and symptoms 2. Control atmosphere (heat, sun, sugar, etc.) 3. Inform and assure teammates when they occur
<input type="checkbox"/> Poor muscle tone	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide specific exercise and strengthening programs 2. Stretch safely; do not allow athletes to stretch beyond normal joint range of motion
<input type="checkbox"/> Lower pain threshold; sensitive to touch	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish eye contact when talking 2. Use softer/adaptive equipment 3. Forewarn if any touch is necessary
<input type="checkbox"/> Failure to form social bonds	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Work in small groups 2. Have athletes work in pairs (same pairs for several weeks) 3. Provide highly structured and least distracting environment
<input type="checkbox"/> Over-stimulated easily	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Remove or lessen stimuli (dim lights; soften sound; remove unnecessary objects) 2. Train in separate room or smaller group; gradually add people
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty with balance or stability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide additional assistance 2. If stretching, sit down, lean against wall or hold on to partner 3. Allow for extra time to complete a task

Coaching Special Olympics Athletes Information and Problem Solving

Athlete Characteristics	Strategies to Improve Learning
<input type="checkbox"/> Compulsive eating	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Remove food from practice/competition sites 2. Provide structure and routine for eating
<input type="checkbox"/> Coordination problems	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Break down drills to easier movements 2. Allow additional time with one-on-one support 3. Progress according to athlete's ability
<input type="checkbox"/> Mood swings (frequency and intensity)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide structured and predictable activities 2. Set clear expectations, limits and conditions 3. Separate from group when necessary, but allow back
<input type="checkbox"/> Physical limitations or impairments	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provide adaptive equipment or modifications 2. Provide exercises that strengthen and stretch muscles 3. Develop gross motor and stability skills
<input type="checkbox"/> Blind	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use many verbal cues 2. Provide action-specific feedback 3. Hand-over-hand demonstration may be needed
<input type="checkbox"/> Deaf	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Establish eye contact when talking 2. Use signs or pictures or American Sign Language 3. demonstrate what is desired