



# Athlete-Centered Coaching Guide

## What Special Olympics Athletes Want From Their Coaches

*As athletes, we want our coaches to be dedicated to the team by committing to learn more, not only about their sport but also the athletes. We want our coaches to know our individual strengths, weaknesses, and the personality traits that make us unique from our fellow teammates.*

*As an athlete, I expect my coaches to:*

- Put me in a position to be successful and challenge me to help realize my potential.*
- Teach us teamwork and unselfish play and to know our limits, keeping in mind the "safety first" rule.*
- Make playing and being part of a team a fun and enjoyable experience.*
- Be open to change, because a drill may work for some of the team, but not for all of the team.*
- Know the rules of the sport with regard to both the sport-specific governing body and Special Olympics standards.*

*— Matt Millett, Special Olympics athlete and member of the 2013 Special Olympics International Coaching Fellowship*



# Acknowledgements

This guide is a general introduction to coaching adults and children with intellectual disabilities. This guide also includes a section focusing on some behaviors commonly associated with intellectual disabilities and effective strategies to improve athlete learning.

Since this is a general guide, it is suggested that you consult as many resources as possible when meeting and learning about your athletes. Resources include: the athlete, his or her family members or guardians, teachers, employers, and others. Remember, athletes are unique individuals with unique interests, likes and dislikes, and varying ways of expression.

Please note: References provided in this guide are listed at the end.

## Special Olympics Coaching Fellowship

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# What are Intellectual Disabilities?

According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), intellectual disability is characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning (reasoning, learning, problem-solving) and adaptive behavior, which can cover a range of everyday social and practical skills. These disabilities originate before age 18.<sup>i</sup> People with intellectual disabilities are unique, just like everyone else. Disabilities impact each person differently, so it is important to get to know your athletes personally. The information in this document will provide a broad overview of elements of intellectual disabilities to help you understand the wide variety of athletes you will coach. Adaptive behaviors, as defined by the AAIDD (2013), include actions and routines performed by people in their daily lives and include three categories: conceptual skills, social skills, and practical skills.<sup>ii</sup> A summary of some elements that comprise these categories, as described by the AAIDD, is below:

## Conceptual Skills

*Language and literacy*

*Financial competence and understanding*

*Concepts of time*

*Self-direction*

## Social Skills

*Interpersonal skills*

*Self-esteem*

*Social responsibility*

*Gullibility*

*Naiveté*

*An ability to follow rules*

## Practical Skills

*Activities of daily living (self-care)*

*Occupational skills*

*Schedule/routines*

*Travel/transportation<sup>iii</sup>*



## Characteristics Affecting Athlete Performance in Training and Competition

*The following are general observations from the field and will vary from athlete to athlete.*

*Athletes' confidence levels may be low.*

*Athletes may be hesitant to try new things.*

*Athletes may be overwhelmed by a large amount of new information at once (such as multiple steps of a new skill being presented at the same time).*

*Athletes with intellectual disabilities may view each learning experience as a new one, instead of attaching new experiences to prior-learned ideas or knowledge.*



# Examples of Intellectual Disabilities

## Down Syndrome

People with Down syndrome have 47 chromosomes, rather than 46.<sup>iv</sup> People with Down syndrome vary widely in personality, ability, appearance, and intellectual functioning. Because symptoms of Down syndrome differ in degree and occurrence, it is difficult to predict what coaching an athlete with Down syndrome will be like without getting to know the athlete. Below are considerations to keep in mind when coaching an athlete with Down syndrome.

### BEHAVIORAL CONSIDERATIONS

Many athletes with Down syndrome:

*May have delayed language and speech skills<sup>v</sup>*

*Can communicate using the spoken word*

*May have shorter attention span<sup>vi</sup>*

### PHYSICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Athletes with Down syndrome may:

*Be short in stature<sup>vii</sup>*

*Have poor muscle tone and/or very loose joints<sup>viii</sup>*

*Have poor equilibrium (balance)<sup>ix</sup>*

*May have a tendency to develop Alzheimer's or symptoms of dementia at an earlier age<sup>x</sup>*



## Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is defined as a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal communication, nonverbal communication and social interactions.<sup>xi</sup> As with athletes with Down syndrome, athletes with Autism Spectrum Disorder will differ greatly. Understanding a disability goes a long way, but getting to know each athlete as an individual is essential to good coaching.

### ATHLETES WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER MAY:

*Appear non-responsive to outside stimuli or demonstrate unusual responses to sensory experiences, such as hearing a referee's whistle, seeing the lights of a score board, or feeling the rubber of a basketball*

*Engage in repetitive activity*

*Resist change in the environment or routine*

*Exhibit self-stimulatory behaviors, such as hand flapping or rocking*

- *Not initiate conversations with peers/adults<sup>xii</sup>*





# Co-occurring Conditions Commonly Associated with Intellectual Disabilities

## Difficulty Processing Information (Sensory Processing Disorder)

Some athletes may have difficulty processing and/or responding appropriately to information from the five senses. Athletes with this disorder may appear to struggle with coordination, have difficulty calming down after an activity, withdraw from touch, be overly active or sluggish, or be hypersensitive to clothing (uniforms).<sup>xiii</sup>

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### *Coaching tips*

*Due to sensory challenges, some athletes may struggle to interact with their sports environments. For example, the feeling of grass on their skin may make some athletes feel very uncomfortable. You might notice an athlete avoiding stretches that involve sitting on the grass. If a conversation with the athlete reveals that they do not like the feel of grass on their skin, suggest they wear long sweat pants during stretches with shorts underneath so they can take off the long pants if they get too hot during the practice.*

*Some athletes may have sensory challenges that make important sports elements (like whistles) overwhelming. It is important to help athletes slowly become accustomed to these elements over time so the athlete can respond appropriately during competition.*

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## Atlantoaxial Instability

According to Rule 2.02 (g) of the Special Olympics General Rules:

Accredited Programs must take the following precautions before permitting athletes who, during a physical examination demonstrate symptoms of spinal cord compression and/or symptomatic AAI to participate in certain physical activities:

- 1) **Determination of Symptoms.** *All Athletes, when they receive the standard pre-participation physical examination referred to in this Article 2, must be examined by a Licensed Medical Professional for symptoms of adverse neurological effects, including those that could result from spinal cord compression or symptomatic AAI. Such symptoms may include: significant neck pain, radicular pain (localized neurological pain), weakness, numbness, spasticity (unusual “tightness” of certain muscles) or change in muscle tone, gait difficulties, hyperreflexia (highly reactive deep tendon reflexes), change in bowel or bladder function or other signs or symptoms of myelopathy (injury to the spinal cord).*
  - a) **Presence of Symptoms.** *If a Licensed Medical Professional confirms the presence of symptomatic spinal cord compression and/or symptomatic AAI during the medical examination of an athlete, such athlete may be permitted to participate in the Special Olympics sport of the athlete’s choice only if (i) the athlete has received a thorough neurological evaluation from a physician, qualified to make such*



*a determination, who certifies that the athlete may participate **and** the athlete, or the parent or guardian of a minor athlete, has signed an informed consent acknowledging they have been informed of the findings and determinations of the physician. The statements and certifications required by this subsection shall be documented and provided to Accredited Programs using the standardized form approved by SOI, entitled "Special Release for Athletes with Symptomatic Spinal Cord Compression and/or symptomatic Atlanto-axial Instability," and any revisions of that form, approved by SOI (the "Special Release Concerning Spinal Cord Compression and/or symptomatic Atlanto-axial Instability").*

## Orthopedic Impairments

An orthopedic impairment is a severe impairment of the skeletal system and associated structures of muscles and ligaments that negatively impact quality of life or the ability to independently perform activities of daily living (ADLs). The term includes impairments caused by birth defects, impairments caused by disease (such as poliomyelitis, bone tuberculosis), and impairments from other causes (such as cerebral palsy, amputations and fractures, or burns that cause contractures). Orthopedic impairments can be classified in three categories: neuromotor impairments (such as spina bifida and cerebral palsy), degenerative diseases (such as muscular dystrophy), and musculoskeletal diseases (rheumatoid arthritis).<sup>xiv</sup> Due to the broad nature of orthopedic impairments, it is difficult to generalize what symptoms an individual might have. Some possible symptoms of orthopedic impairments include, but are not limited to, the following:

- *Abnormal reflex development*
- *Difficulty in coordinating and integrating basic movement patterns<sup>xv</sup>*

*Speech impairments<sup>xvi</sup>*

- *Sensory impairments (visual motor control)*





## Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is a condition that describes athletes who display hyperactive and/or inattentive behaviors, have difficulty attending to a task at hand due to a heightened awareness to external stimuli, and tend to be impulsive.<sup>xvii</sup>

According to the NIMH, symptoms of ADHD include, but are not limited to, the following:

- *Inattention*
- *Hyperactivity*
- *Poor listening skills*
- *Restlessness*
- *Impulsiveness*<sup>xviii</sup>

### SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH ADHD:

- *Inappropriate responses to new or challenging social/emotional situations that they may not be prepared to handle*<sup>xix</sup>
- *Difficulty in selecting appropriate responses*
- *Inadequate practical social skills*<sup>xx</sup>
- *May avoid participation*
- *May be verbally disruptive*<sup>xxi</sup>
- *May seek constant reassurance*
- *May exhibit tantrums*<sup>xxii</sup>
- *May have difficulty waiting for things they want or waiting their turn*<sup>xxiii</sup>



## Participation by Persons Who Are Blood-Borne Contagious Disease Carriers

No Accredited Special Olympics Program or Games Organizing Committee (GOC) may exclude or isolate from participation in any Special Olympics training or competition any athlete who is known to be a carrier of a blood-borne contagious infection or virus, or otherwise discriminate against such athletes solely because of that medical condition. In view of the risk that one or more Special Olympics athletes may have a blood-borne contagious infection or virus, in conducting Special Olympics training and competition events, Accredited Programs and GOCs shall follow “Universal Precautions” or “Universal Blood and Body Fluid Precautions” for every exposure to any person's blood, saliva, or other bodily fluid. Special Olympics International shall keep Accredited Programs apprised of the written Universal Precautions which meet the requirements of this Section 2.05 in the General Rules. For more information about Universal Precautions, coaches are encouraged to visit: <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/bbp/universal.html>.





# Psychological Considerations Related to Learning and Recommended Teaching Strategies

There are four main psychological considerations related to an athlete's ability to learn: motivation, perception, comprehension, and memory.

## Motivation

For challenges in motivation, coaches can help athletes gain and maintain interest. The following suggestions for engaging and/or maintaining athletes' interest stem from a 2012 study of elite Massachusetts Special Olympics coaches<sup>xxiv</sup>.

- *Create competitive scenarios for athletes during drills and other activities.*
- *Reference local sports teams and well-known athletes when delivering instruction or feedback.*
- *Use encouraging phrases like "well done" and "I know you can do it." Praise effort when athletes are practicing and refining skills.*
- *Use encouraging gestures like high-fives and fist-bumps (as long as the athletes do not have sensory issues against touch) to encourage and praise effort when athletes are practicing and refining skills.*
- *Keep drill lines short to maintain athletes' engagement.*



In addition to the suggestions made above, coaches are encouraged to:

- *Keep the duration of drills short (about 8-10 minutes) to maintain athletes' interest and attention.*
- *Make short-term goals with athletes before each practice (goals can be related to sport performance or behavior).*
- *Occasionally build athletes' skill strengths into drills and scrimmages so they experience feelings of success and confidence when applying them in the context of performing the sport.*

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### **Coaching tips**

***Astacio was very motivated at the beginning of practices, but lost enthusiasm as practices progressed. After a conversation with the coach, it was discovered that Astacio felt he could never win at the drills, which left him feeling discouraged. The coach modified practices to review the skills that Astacio was good at first, which built his confidence for the remainder of practice. Finding success at the beginning of the practice motivated Astacio to actively participate in the rest of practice.***

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## Perception

For challenges in **perception**, coaches can help athletes process information about the sport. Coaches are encouraged to:

- *Provide equipment or other accommodations for athletes with physical impairments that may affect perception, such as visual or auditory disabilities.*
- *Intentionally connect new concepts to previously learned ideas in order to 1) help athletes remember what they already know and 2) help athletes correctly organize information in their brains. For instance, if a coach teaches her basketball athletes how to do set shots on Monday, she can refer to the hand position and shooting motion of a set shot when she teaches athletes how to make foul shots on Friday.*



## Comprehension

For challenges in **comprehension**, coaches can help athletes understand the sport in which they are participating and perform requisite skills. Several methods can be used to develop the skills and knowledge needed to compete successfully. Coaches are encouraged to:

- *Apply the appropriate level of instruction. This is often done through trial and error. It is important to note that every athlete will present with his/her own subset of skills and abilities, even an athlete with the same diagnoses/disorder.*
- *Realize that frequent repetition and reinforcement over time will improve the athlete's skill development.*
- *Since some athletes have difficulty in generalizing skills, provide opportunities for athletes to utilize new skills in appropriate situations. Coaches can provide opportunities for participation in competition-like scenarios via scrimmages or other games that require athletes to feel time pressure, use decision-making skills, or employ newly-learned technical skills.*
- *When giving athletes feedback, coaches can ask them to verbally summarize or physically demonstrate what they learned.*
- *Coaches should periodically allow athletes time to rest their bodies and minds by providing settling time. Settling time can be given in the form of water breaks; suggestions that athletes remove themselves from practice for a few minutes; or by allowing athletes to independently decide to remove themselves from practice for a few minutes.*
- *Coaches can “scaffold” their lessons by giving a lot of support to athletes when they first learn a skill, then reduce supports as skill levels increase. Coaches can “chunk” and “chain” content by breaking large concepts into smaller pieces (“chunking”) and progressively teaching each “piece” in a progressing sequence (“chaining”).*



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### Coaching tips

***Structure your season to use early practices to teach basic skills and provide opportunities for team play. Then build on those basic skills and team play each following practice. Planning the whole season of practices will make it easier to modify your practices to fit the unique needs of your team and still ensure you will be ready for competition.***

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## Memory

For challenges with **memory**, coaches can help athletes remember and perform skills at the appropriate time. Coaches are encouraged to repeat and refer to previously learned skills often and in different scenarios/contexts. This will increase muscle memory in the athletes, freeing up brain power to focus on the next level of skill/game development.

# Developmental Appropriateness

When working with any athlete population, it is important for coaches to ask athletes to perform technical skills (fundamentals) and tactical skills (game or event strategies) that are *developmentally appropriate* relative to athletes' physical and intellectual capabilities. Introducing skills that are too advanced for athletes' capabilities can lead to unsafe sport environments and frustration. For instance, it would be inappropriate for a soccer coach working with 6-year-olds to ask her athletes to practice slide tackles, because the physical and intellectual processing skills required to successfully perform slide tackles are not yet present in 6-year-olds.



Conversely, asking athletes to perform skills that are not challenging and do not promote skill development can lead to boredom and regression of skill level. A challenge faced by every sport coach is to identify technical and tactical skills that are developmentally appropriate and present a motivating (versus frustrating) challenge for athletes.

In addition, coaches may notice that an athlete's chronological age may not always align with his or her developmental age and/or maturity level, but it's important to note that developmental age does not affect athletic ability or potential. Taking these respective "ages" into consideration can help a coach identify techniques and game or event strategies that are appropriate for athletes to perform.



# Behavior Modification

## Observation of Athlete's Behavior During Training or Competition

When coaching athletes with intellectual disabilities, observe specific athlete behaviors in order to determine the coaching strategies and structure needed to address behaviors that may inhibit the athletes' participation in training or competitive environments:

- *Entering the site (environmental entrance): What is the behavior of the athlete when he/she comes to the training site or competition venue? Is the athlete in control of his or her body and emotions? Note: athlete control may look different in different scenarios and environments.*
- *Leaving the site (environmental exit): What is the behavior of the athlete as he/she leaves the training or competition site? Is the athlete in control of his or her body and mind, especially with regard to reactions to winning or losing? Note: athlete control may look different in different scenarios and environments.*
- *Active participation: Is the athlete in control (attentive, focusing on the task, persistent in completing the task, and handling feedback without incident)?*
- *Non-active behavior (behavior that emerges as the athlete waits for a turn or needs to watch a demonstration): Is the athlete in control and able to inhibit negative impulse behavior? Note: coaches are encouraged to have a plan to keep athletes' bodies and minds engaged during ALL stages of drills and activities.*
- *Competitive attitude: A negative/positive mental position or feeling an athlete has regarding any activity that takes the form of a "contest" between individual athletes or teams of athletes.*
- *Positive participation feedback: While engaged in a task or immediately following completion of a task the athlete exhibits positive feedback, i.e., smiling, expression of joy, laughter, cheering, high-fiving, etc.*
- *Negative participation feedback: While engaged in a task or immediately following completion of a task the athlete exhibits negative feedback, i.e., cries, screams, swears, has tantrums, runs away, strikes out at a coach/official/another athlete/spectator, etc. Note: the responses to different competition outcomes should be discussed and rehearsed prior to the competition.*
- *Reinforced participation: Athlete performs satisfactorily when continually reinforced by the coach, another athlete, parent, etc., but performance is significantly affected negatively when reinforcement is not given. Note: reinforcement should be slowly withdrawn; intermittent reinforcement is best.*
- *Intrinsic participation: The athlete performs tasks without reinforcement and appears to be self-motivated to perform.*
- *Social interaction with peers: are the interactions positive or negative?*
- *Social interaction with coach: are the interactions positive or negative?*

## Redirecting Undesirable Behavior

Redirection for many of the negative interactions should be consistent. All behaviors are driven by a need to get something (praise/reward) or avoid something (non-preferred activity). When we know what drives a behavior, we can develop a plan for changing it. Change is slow and steady if it is to be long-lasting. For specific suggestions, see Health and Behavior Considerations and Strategies to Improve Learning section, page 19.



# Communication Considerations When Working With Special Olympics Athletes

The best way to assess athletes' enjoyment, fears and concerns is to speak with them often; check in with each athlete frequently during practice. If possible, coaches are encouraged to speak with guardians/parents/caregivers to assess their perceptions of athletes' enjoyment.

It is recommended that coaches employ several communication methods when conveying information to athletes. Communication methods include:

- *Verbal communication*
- *Gesture cues (thumbs up, high-fives)*
- *Pointing to pictures. Pictures can be very simple; free applications are available for download on smart phones and tablets*

When communicating with athletes, coaches are encouraged to:

- ***Be respectful:** Speak to your athletes the way you would want to be spoken to. Use appropriate eye contact, respect personal spaces, give athletes time to respond fully and use positive language.*
- ***Be clear:** Use words that an athlete can understand or for which an athlete has a point of reference, such as “see the ball” as opposed to “find the target.”*
- ***Be concrete:** Use words that are specific to something physical and/or real. Since athletes have a cognitive delay in processing information (especially words), the challenge is to make concepts concrete. For example, when teaching the 3-second lane in basketball, a coach can use the physical words of “hot” and “cold” “Hot” refers to the lane on offense; the athlete will burn up if he stops in the lane and not move through it. “Cold” refers to the lane at the defensive end of the court; that lane is cool and the athlete’s friend.*
- ***Be concise:** Use a few descriptive “keywords” or cues. For example: “Reach for the sky.” Do not use long sentences or multi-part instructions.*
- ***Be consistent:** Use the same cue words for the same actions.*
- ***Make words command-oriented:** Verbally reinforce the athlete immediately after a desired action. Make the reinforcement action-oriented and specific to the skill.*
- ***Make sure an athlete is looking at you and can hear you** when making a coaching point. When needed, physically prompt an athlete to look at you.*
- ***Ask athletes questions** rather than always providing directions. Encourage athletes to think for themselves. Verify athlete responses.*





### **A note on cues**

Attach simple cues to important elements of technical and tactical skills. The following suggestions for using cues come from a 2012 study of elite Massachusetts Special Olympics coaches.<sup>xxv</sup>

Following initial instruction of a sport skill or concept, coaches can use the following types of tactical and technical cues to simplify feedback and make communication more efficient:

- *Verbal cues: simple, short phrases that include sport-specific terminology*
- *Gesture cues: coach-demonstrated physical movements that remind athletes of the correct way to perform a skill (often paired with verbal cues)*
- *Touch cues: taps on the athletes' body to elicit movement. Be sure the athlete is comfortable being touched before using touch cues*

### **A note on people-first language**

Communicating respectfully about and to your athletes is the first step in gaining their trust and creating a mutually respectful team. Always put the athlete first and leave the disability behind; for example, refer to a person with an intellectual disability rather than an intellectually disabled person. Avoid labeling athletes in any negative way, but do feel free to respectfully ask an athlete questions about his/her disability. When in doubt, always ask an athlete if and /or how he or she prefers to talk about the disability. It is important to understand your athletes fully, and understanding their disability is part of that.

# Teaching Sportsmanship and Teamwork

## **Athlete Conduct**

The coach is responsible for keeping athletes under control. Do so by setting a good example and by disciplining when necessary. Set team rules for good behavior. If athletes attempt to cheat, fight, argue, badger, or yell disparaging remarks, it is your responsibility to confront the misbehavior. Initially, it may mean removing athletes immediately from the competition or practice. Let them calm down, speak to them quietly, and



explain that his or her behavior is not acceptable for your team and if they want to participate, they must not repeat the action. Allow athletes to return to play when ready, able and in control of their emotions.

Consider team rules in these areas of competition conduct:

- *Athlete language*
- *Athlete behavior*
- *Interactions with officials or judges*
- *Discipline for misbehavior*



Respect opponents and officials. Without them, there wouldn't be a competition. Officials help provide a fair and safe experience for athletes and, as appropriate, help them learn the sport. Opponents provide opportunities for your team to test itself, improve, and excel.

You and your team should show respect for opponents by giving your best efforts. Showing respect means being civil to your opponents. Don't allow your athletes to "trash talk" or taunt an opponent. This behavior is disrespectful to the spirit of the competition and to the opponent. Immediately remove athletes from a competition or practice if they trash talk or taunt an opponent. When appropriate, request that violations be called. Enforcing the rules and calling violations assists athletes in maintaining a high level of their skills and reinforces their learning the rules. As long as the calls are being made consistently on both sides, most of your officiating concerns will be alleviated.

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### ***Coaching Tips***

***Keep your demeanor even and positive, conduct your responsibilities the same regardless of the score, help correct your athletes' errors in a positive manner, and continue to offer encouragement to each athlete.***

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## **After Competition**

When the competition is over, join your team in congratulating the coaches and athletes of the opposing team, and then be sure to thank the officials. Check on any injuries athletes may have sustained during the competition and inform athletes of how to care for them. Be prepared to speak with the officials about any problems that occurred during the competition. Then hold a brief meeting—or "team circle"—to ensure that your athletes are on an even keel, whether they won or lost. Do a "Cool Down," stretching all major muscles. This can either be done separately or incorporated into your team circle while you address the team.

When celebrating a victory, make sure your team does so in a way that doesn't show disrespect for the opponents. It is okay and appropriate to be happy and celebrate a win, but do not allow your athletes to taunt the opponents or boast about their victory. Keep winning in perspective. Winning and losing are a part of life, not just a part of sport. If athletes can handle both equally well, they'll be successful in whatever they do. Athletes' self-worth should not be tied to the win or the loss. Recognize and reward efforts and attitudes.

Athletes are competitors, and competitors are disappointed in defeat. If your team has made a winning effort, let them know this. After a loss, help them keep chins up and maintain a positive attitude that will carry over into the next practice and contest.

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### ***Coaching Tips***

***Immediately following a competition, regardless of the outcome, stay positive. When the athletes return to practice after a competition, make certain that you let the previous competition go, learn from the experience, make needed corrections, and focus on the next opponent and next competition.***

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## Post-Competition Team Meeting

Following the competition, gather your team for a “team circle” in a designated area for a short meeting. The athletes can sit or kneel on one knee, and they may take off any extra equipment, if applicable. Before this meeting, decide as a coaching staff what to say and who will say it. Be sure that the coaching staff speaks with one voice following the competition.

If your athletes have performed well in a contest, compliment them and congratulate them. Tell them specifically what they did well, whether they won or lost. This will reinforce interest in repeating good performances. Don’t use this time to criticize individual athletes for poor performances in front of teammates. Help athletes improve skills, but do so in the next practice, not immediately after the competition.

The post-competition team circle isn’t the time to go over tactical problems and adjustments. The athletes will be excited after a win or disappointed after a loss and won’t absorb much tactical information. Your first concern should be your athletes’ attitudes and mental well-being. You don’t want them to be too high after a win or too low after a loss. This is the time you can be most influential in keeping the outcome in perspective and keeping them on an even keel. Set goals based on the sport’s statistics such as



rebounds, steals, turnovers, completed passes, field goals and free throws (attempts and makes), fast breaks, etc. Following the game, note how many of those goals were achieved; those goals not achieved provide information on what we need to work on next.

Remember, too, that although the final outcome of the competition may be extremely important to you, the staff, and some of the parents, sometimes athletes are more focused on the possibility of pizza after the competition. Realize that the majority of your athletes are participating to have fun; their desire to go out together for something to eat rather than reliving the competition is not a reflection on the desire to perform well. Stay positive, allow the athletes to be themselves, and avoid making too much over the outcome of the competition.

Finally, gather your athletes, coaches and parents/providers, go to your vehicles and drive home. Ensure your athletes have appropriate transportation.





# Coaching Unified Sports®

Special Olympics Unified Sports® is a program that joins people with intellectual disabilities (athletes) and without intellectual disabilities (partners) on the same team. Furthermore, Unified Sports is dedicated to promoting social inclusion through shared sports training and competition experiences. This was inspired by a simple principle: training together and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding.

When Unified Sports teams are made up of people of similar age and ability, practices are more fun and games more challenging and exciting for all. Having sport in common is just one more way that preconceptions and false ideas are swept away. When coaching a Unified Sports team, it is important to remember and emphasize that every player on your team is equally important to the success of the team. Partners should be coached as much as athletes to ensure team cohesion and success.



As in all sports, the need for most athletes to belong or affiliate with other team members is of critical importance. The process of making friends and developing certain roles within the group is as much a part of sport as training and competition. Coaches should be especially alert at the beginning of the season when teammates are getting to know each other and judgments about others are being developed.

A key component in the genuine integration of special populations in Unified Sports programs is the attitude, knowledge and subsequent behavior of the coach. Genuine integration of athletes and partners relies on three key factors, all influenced by the coach:

- (a) Interaction among teammates
- (b) Perception of special treatment given to the athlete or partner by the coach
- (c) Recognition and acceptance of individual impairments in preparing teammates to successfully train and compete with each other

The challenge of Unified Sports competitions is to help people without intellectual disabilities integrate into the previously exclusionary teams of Special Olympics. Coaches need to plan, implement and evaluate actions to assure meaningful participation and enhanced social development of all players. The type of activity, amount of accommodation necessary, and intensity of competition are considered in structuring the sport experience. Activities should foster respect for the uniqueness of everyone's abilities, motivation and contribution to the Unified Sports team. Developing sport skills is the foremost task of the coach since athletes who are not competent to meet the demands of the Unified Sports setting and related social roles risk disapproval from teammates and others, along with blows to self-esteem. The risks of winning and losing in integrated programs are compounded for both athlete and partner.



Group cohesion is a term to describe the tendency for members of a group to stick together and remain united as they work toward collective goals and social purposes. Athletes and partners in cohesive teams will display more positive attitudes, increased confidence and maximize sport performance. Group cohesion can be improved by the following suggestions:

- *Use small groups (3-6 people) for practice drills and other team tasks when possible.*
- *Set team goals that athletes and partners understand and success can be easily determined.*
- *Clarify each team member's role on the team.*
- *Encourage all players to communicate by calling each other by his or her name.*
- *Create opportunities for general communication among players before, during, and after practice or competition.*
- *Take the time to recognize specific players for good performance and encourage teammates to do the same.*
- *Use cooperative drills that build respect for each player's contribution to the sport.*

Effective Unified Sports teams benefit athletes and partners equally. The most effective learning occurs when all players are actively learning by doing. Instruction designed for small groups and pairs will maximize time on task and aid in providing critical feedback on performance. In designing small groups for a Unified Player Development model, you can either place athletes/partners with similar ability in the same group, or design groups of mixed ability. In all cases, there should be a representative number of athletes and partners, and all team members are meaningfully involved and contribute to the team.

The following recommendations are useful in making decisions about grouping players:

- *When a skill, rule, or strategy is being taught that all your players need to know, use a single group for instruction, but then allow for small groups of similar ability to practice the skill at various learning stations.*
- *When the activity involves combination drills or team tactics, use multiple groups of mixed ability for practice. Some players will seem to play better with certain other players, but encourage all players to get to know how to perform their best in any group situation.*
- *Establish new groups or pairs for practicing different skills. Avoid similar player pairing for more than one or two activities a practice.*

Have a prepared plan for how to group or pair teammates for each activity. Have players self-select teammates once in a while to build a sense of control and competence, but be careful of cliques that tend to devalue less skilled players. Successful teams value each team member equally and will improve player self-esteem on and off the field.

Here is what two Unified Sports players had to say about their experiences:



“This experience made me a better team leader and a good friend. It made me brave to be myself.”

~ *Mackenzie Beauvais-Nikl,*  
*Special Olympics Unified Sports Athlete*

“The biggest personal impact for me was realizing how talented individuals with disabilities can be. By experiencing first-hand the hard work and effort these young adults put forth I have been inspired to work just as hard and to be who I am without fear of discrimination.”

~ *Dylan Spencer,*  
*Special Olympics Unified Sports Partner*



## Health and Behavior Considerations and Strategies to Improve Learning

The goal of the chart below is to provide coaches with information (not labels) and strategies regarding different functional and learning characteristics (not labels) of athletes and to help Special Olympics coaches work with athletes more effectively. However, a coach may have certain expectations of an athlete that may not be realistic. This is not because the coach does not care, but because the coach does not understand or appreciate the differences that may exist. When an athlete exhibits what is generally perceived as inappropriate behavior(s), the inappropriate behavior(s) may not be defiance, acting out or silliness. These behaviors may simply be a part of the person and/or what is operating at the moment. 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.

Characteristics	Strategies to Improve Learning
Learning occurs at a slower rate	1) Provide structure & train more frequently. 2) Provide repetition and review. Circle back to previously mastered skills. 3) Break skills down into smaller parts. Don't move on until a skill is mastered. 4) Differentiate learning – teach at the level of the athlete; remove supports as skills are mastered. 5) Assign a partner, volunteer or assistant coach to help. Provide additional repetitions without holding up the practice. 6) Present skills in a variety of ways. Explain, demonstrate, and practice. When explaining a skill/drill, it may be necessary to illustrate the skill.



Characteristics	Strategies to Improve Learning
Short attention span	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Train for short periods of time; provide numerous activities focusing on same task.</li> <li>2) Provide repetition &amp; review (key to gaining new skill).</li> <li>3) Work one-on-one (gain full attention). Do not explain a drill/skill without gaining attention from an athlete. This may be demonstrated by attaining eye contact or having the player repeat after you the directions stated for the drill. (30 seconds is the amount of time that people can retain information in short-term memory.)</li> <li>4) Use stations. Stations are a great way to circle back to previously learned skills. Depending on the number of volunteers, running 3–5 stations for 30 minutes of practice is appropriate.</li> </ol>
Resistance to change	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Structure training with clear expectations, consistent routines (follow same format for each practice i.e.: warm-up lap, stretching, review drills for reinforcement of previously learned material, new drills, controlled play situations in which to practice new skills) and a cool down.</li> <li>2) Players should be made aware when a transition will happen. State the time to be spent on an activity and give a warning of its end 5 minutes prior; two minutes prior and then at the close of the activity.</li> <li>3) Identify motivating factors; build on successes. If there is a favorite drill, save it for the end of practice when all objectives have been met.</li> </ol>
Acting out; mood swings	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Set clear rules, expectations and limits; specify location for individual to regain self-control. Consistent enforcement of limits is a MUST. Athletes will learn quickly when you mean something and when you do not.</li> <li>2) Consequences should be enforceable and short term.</li> <li>3) Reinforce acceptable behaviors. Praising positive behaviors may be enough of a motivator for the athlete. Rewards can also be given in the absence of undesirable behaviors, that is, 5 minutes without cursing earns a check; five checks gets a reward specific to the athlete.</li> <li>4) Help the athlete find a replacement behavior that serves the same function. All behavior serves a function. If the athlete attends school or lives in a group home, there may be a behavior plan in place. Speak with the caretakers of the athlete and find out what is in place.</li> <li>5) NOTE: Just because a behavior has not been noted for an extended period of time, does not mean it is gone. Be aware if it re-surfaces.</li> <li>6) A behavior (intervention) support plan is developed after collecting information about the function of a particular behavior – to get something or avoid something. A similar but acceptable behavior is then taught. The student is rewarded for using the replacement behavior and the reinforcement schedule is reduced until the replacement behavior has eliminated the inappropriate behavior.</li> </ol>



Characteristics	Strategies to Improve Learning
Difficulty communicating	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Allow additional time to express thoughts. Don't finish the sentence or thought for the athlete.</li> <li>2) Use picture boards/other assistive devices. Simple sign language may also work. Speak with caretakers to gain information on how they communicate with the athlete.</li> <li>3) Ask him or her to demonstrate or show what he/she means. Some athletes have their own communication devices or tools. If so, a conversation with a parent/caregiver might be useful.</li> </ol>
Verbal interpretation difficulties	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Provide the appropriate level of instruction beginning with demonstration (can be spoken, drawn or demonstrated) followed by the appropriate level of prompting. Each athlete will require different supports at different times for different skills.</li> <li>2) Keep verbal instructions to a minimum.</li> <li>3) Use key words/cues, sign language or pictures to communicate.</li> </ol>
Prone to seizures	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Know signs and symptoms of different types of seizures.</li> <li>2) Control OR MODIFY atmosphere/triggers (heat, sun, sugar, loud noise, etc.) of seizures; respond appropriately. Have a volunteer/parent on sideline watch the athlete, specifically during the practice/game for any signs that may occur. If the activity cannot be modified, find something else for the athlete to do such as take stats, collect equipment, or hand out scrimmage vests or T-shirts. He/she is still part of the team.</li> <li>3) Prepare teammates to respond appropriately should a seizure occur. Have a plan in place and practice it.</li> </ol>
Poor muscle tone	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Provide specific exercise and strengthening programs. Provide home exercises for motivated athletes. Discuss with parents, siblings the importance of a home practice. You can provide data sheets in which the athlete tracks his/her progress. Rewards can be given for goals met.</li> <li>2) Stretch within normal range of motion. Each athlete's range of motion will be different on different days. Teach athletes to listen to their bodies, and if it hurts, STOP!</li> <li>3) Uneven surfaces increase risk of injury. Worn footwear can also contribute to injury.</li> </ol>
Lower pain threshold; sensitive to touch	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) When appropriate, establish eye contact when talking. Some athletes may become more upset about maintaining eye contact. Know your athletes.</li> <li>2) Use softer/adaptive equipment; minimize loud noises like whistles (or gradually introduce them).</li> <li>3) Forewarn if any touch is necessary; respect wishes.</li> </ol>
Difficulty forming social bonds	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Work in small groups.</li> <li>2) Have each athlete work in pairs (same 2 people for several weeks). Some athletes will prefer to work by themselves. Find a sport/position which will honor this preference. It may be that the athlete needs to change sports.</li> <li>3) Provide highly structured social situations when athlete is engaging in a preferred activity with a peer.</li> </ol>



Characteristics	Strategies to Improve Learning
Easily over-stimulated	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Remove or lessen distracting stimuli (dim lights; soften sounds; remove unnecessary objects).</li> <li>2) Train in separate room or smaller group; gradually add people and other stimuli.</li> <li>3) Train with athletes who tend to be nonverbal.</li> <li>4) Planned breaks and quiet time during practice, between activities if possible. This will enable the athlete to “regroup” before moving on to another activity.</li> </ol>
Difficulty with balance or stability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Provide physical support, as needed, via partner or other assistive device.</li> <li>2) Broaden base of support such as sitting down or leaning against wall; minimize uneven surfaces. Certain positions on a team lend themselves to being more conducive to athlete success than others. Find the position that fits your athlete’s abilities.</li> <li>3) Allow for extra time to complete a task. Modify the task to fit the athlete’s ability level.</li> <li>4) Speak with physical therapist if possible, brainstorm with other coaches for ideas. Caregivers may also be able to provide information/assistance.</li> </ol>
Compulsive eating	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Remove food from practice/competition sites.</li> <li>2) Do not use food as reward (especially for individuals with Prader Willi).</li> <li>3) Provide structure and routine for eating (time and place). If this has been a longstanding issue for your athletes, caregivers can give suggestions on what they have successfully used in the past which you can modify to fit your coaching situation.</li> </ol>
Poor coordination	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Break skills down into sequential tasks; substitute easier movement (walking instead of running).</li> <li>2) Progress from athlete’s current level of performance. Charting improvement is a great motivator.</li> <li>3) Allow additional time with one-on-one support.</li> <li>4) Provide a home practice plan. This will help build muscle memory as well as stamina and coordination. Using time at home for reinforcement will allow for more time at practice for exposure to new drills/skills.</li> </ol>
Physical limitations or impairments	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Utilize those skills or parts of skills athlete can perform.</li> <li>2) For those skills or parts of skills athlete is unable to perform, allow athlete to substitute other skills, have partner execute those skills or use assistive device.</li> <li>3) Focus on activities that develop mobility and stability.</li> <li>4) Speak with outside therapists, caregivers for suggestions.</li> </ol>
Visual impairments	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Use verbal cues, physical prompt and physical assistance as needed.</li> <li>2) Utilize sound or physical devices such as beep balls, guide rope along lane line, tether when running with partner, etc. and according to the rules.</li> <li>3) Provide precise and action-specific and feedback.</li> <li>4) Control any environmental factors which you can i.e. lighting; colors of balls, cones, scrimmage vests or T-shirts, etc.</li> <li>5) Wireless transmitter may be appropriate and available.</li> </ol>



Characteristics	Strategies to Improve Learning
Hearing impairments	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Establish eye contact when talking.</li> <li>2) Use signs, pictures or sign language; keep cochlear implants dry. You can even develop sport-specific signs (think third base coach in baseball).</li> <li>3) Demonstrate what is desired.</li> <li>4) Use hand signals; remind athletes to look to the coach for directions. You may need to have a parent/coach on other side of field to relay messages if needed or to direct athlete to look at the coach.</li> </ol>
Autism spectrum disorder	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Minimize verbal communication; emphasize use of visual supports such as pictures (Board Maker application) to identify directions/commands (stop; wait; keep hands to self, etc.). Also use pictures to develop schedules such as warm-up; pass the ball; play the game; clean up the equipment; rest. Visual supports are helpful because of difficulty in processing sensory stimuli (over arousal); provide only one item per picture.</li> <li>2) Reduce sensory overload like whistles (some athletes are hypersensitive to noise).</li> <li>3) Individualize schedule with known start &amp; known finish (predictability); use clear, consistent cues &amp; prompts; cue transition from one activity to next.</li> <li>4) Autism is a “spectrum,” so not all athletes with autism will have the same needs. Some will be less severe than others. Individuals with Asperger’s can be very bright but have social deficits that may impede them from developing social bonds. Meet with caregivers for specifics concerning your athlete.</li> </ol>
Self-stimulatory behaviors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Become aware and monitor. Self-stimulatory behaviors are any behaviors that are serving a sensory need for the athlete. Sometimes, these behaviors are sexual in nature. The athlete will need to be taught the “time and place” where these behaviors are acceptable (a practice or a game is NOT one of them). Work with the caregiver to help develop a protocol for the athlete.</li> <li>2) Control situation. Engage athlete in activities that provide an alternative to self-stimulatory behavior. If an athlete flaps his or her hands/arms when running, practice running with “quiet hands.”</li> </ol>
Self-injurious behaviors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Become aware of cutting skin or banging head against table or wall. Work with medical personnel.</li> <li>2) Control and prevent behavior. Redirect the athlete to an alternate behavior. Seek support of medical personnel or caretakers, as needed.</li> <li>3) Provide a behavior support plan to manage (page 20, under Acting Out, number 6).</li> </ol>
Obsessive-compulsive behaviors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Become aware and monitor. Compulsive behaviors are any behaviors that are ritualized to a point that the athlete is unable to perform other functions, i.e. picking fingers until bleeding, constant eating, or repetitive statements.</li> <li>2) Control situation and prevent behavior. Redirect the athlete to an alternate behavior.</li> <li>3) Provide a behavior support plan to manage (page 20, under Acting Out, number 6).</li> </ol>



Characteristics	Strategies to Improve Learning
Hyperactivity	1) Set clear rules, consistent routines and smooth transitions with signals for changing activities with motivating reinforcement. 2) Keep directions simple (2-3 steps at the most); minimize information. 3) Have athlete repeat back directions or show what has been asked of him/her to demonstrate an understanding of what has been said. 4) Use stations to shift activities in a short period of time.
Lethargy (due to medication or other causes)	1) Provide frequent rest intervals. 2) Expose to sports that provide natural rest periods such as bocce, bowling, golf, etc. 3) Slowly progress to longer periods of activity. 4) Modify activities for athlete success. 5) Be aware of side effects of medications.
Lack of motivation to push self	1) Be aware that some athletes might tire easily or lack confidence and therefore be less motivated to continue an activity. 2) Match the athlete with a highly motivated teammate. First, select 2-3 highly motivated teammates; let the athlete choose one of the teammates with whom he or she will work. Then transition to the sport. 3) Reward even small improvements in performance. Charting progress is a great visual motivator. 4) Use incentives that are based on achieving specific goals. For example, once we finish _____ (non-preferred activity), we can do _____ (preferred activity).





As we have seen, intellectual disabilities can manifest in different ways in different athletes, even those with the same diagnoses. It is imperative to treat each athlete as an individual with different wants/needs and with different ways of communicating these wants and needs with you, the coach. Assumptions based upon disability type can be detrimental to the athlete, coach and team. Conversations with the athlete's current caretakers (parents, teachers, employers, etc.) can provide important information about the athlete. Use these people as a resource when developing your practice and game plans. Being flexible is also a bonus. The athletes, like all of us, can have different behaviors on different days; be ready for anything!

## **Closing Notes**

After reading this guide, I sincerely hope Special Olympics has given you the knowledge to help us, the athletes, be successful both on and off the playing field.

We want our coaches to:

- *Be role models by showing good sportsmanship.*
- *Encourage family members to help and volunteer in working with us.*
- *Challenge us and help make us better at our chosen sport.*
- *Value the opinion of each athlete.*
- *Most importantly, make it fun!*

*And lastly, always demonstrate the spirit of our Special Olympics athlete oath:*

*"Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt."*

*—Matt Millett, Special Olympics athlete and member of the  
2013 Special Olympics International Coaching Fellowship*



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