

Special Olympics Unified Sports® Quick Reference Guide

Definition

Special Olympics Unified Sports is an inclusive sports program that combines an approximately equal number of Special Olympics athletes (individuals with intellectual disabilities) and partners (individuals without intellectual disabilities) on teams for training and competition. Three models exist within Unified Sports: Unified Sports Competitive, Unified Sports Player Development and Unified Sports Recreation. All three models provide different types of experiences in team sports such as basketball, football and volleyball and in other sports such as bocce, golf and tennis. Unified Sports is now offered throughout the world and has been a Special Olympics internationally sanctioned program since 1989.



Partner Eligibility

The social inclusion objectives of Unified Sports are best fulfilled when a majority of the partners on a team are individuals without disabilities.

Rules

National Governing Body (NGB) rules are enforced unless they are in conflict with Special Olympics modifications.

Unified Sports Parameters of Competition

- A roster containing approximately equal numbers of athletes and partners.
- A line-up during the competition in which half of the participants are athletes, and half of the participants are partners.
- Teams are divisioned for competition based primarily on ability.
- All individuals on the team receive Special Olympics awards.
- There is an adult, non-playing coach for team sports.

Seven (7) Criteria for a Successful Unified Sports Program

Special Olympics adopted Unified Sports in 1989 to expand sports opportunities for athletes seeking new challenges while achieving social inclusion for individuals with intellectual disabilities in the community. Extensive field-testing has demonstrated that Unified Sports teams are most likely to accomplish the goals of the program when the following 7 criteria are met:

- 1) All athletes and partners are **meaningfully involved**.
- 2) **An appropriate sport is selected** – A variety of factors influence the determination of which sport is chosen for Unified Sports training and competition. Some of these factors include availability of qualified coaches, ability levels of potential athletes and partners, finances, availability of facilities and opportunities for competition.
- 3) **Qualified coaches lead the program** – Unified Sports teams should be organized under the guidance of a trained coach who understands the principles of Unified Sports, including social inclusion, and the rules, techniques, strategies and training regimens of the selected sport.
- 4) **Recruitment and selection of appropriate team members** occurs through the process of assessing, forming teams and determining the most appropriate Unified Sports model.
- 5) **Quality training leads to competition** – All team members of a Unified Sports team shall have a minimum of ten to twelve weeks of training (practice, scrimmages and league competition) before the culminating championship event.
- 6) **Unified Sports rules are followed** – All Unified Sports competitions should be conducted according to Official Special Olympics Sports Rules, including placement of Unified Sports teams in appropriate age and ability divisions.
- 7) **Commitment of support:** Support is needed at four levels – *Program; Local Program; Coach; Spectator*.

Additional Training

Unified Sports training can be offered as a standalone training session or as part of a sport-specific coaches' training school. In addition to this handbook, a training video and online course via the NFHS Learning Center website at <http://www.nfhslearn.com/> are also available. Check with your Program staff to see how you can increase your Unified Sports expertise.



Comparison among Unified Sports Competitive, Player Development and Recreation Models

Unified Sports Competitive	Unified Sports Player Development	Unified Sports Recreation
Inclusive sports program	Inclusive sports program	Inclusive recreational sports program
Approximately equal number of athletes and partners train and compete	Approximately equal number of athletes and partners train and compete	Composition of teams should be at least 25% athletes or partners
Similar ability and age of athletes and partners	Similar age of athletes and partners	Does not require athletes and partners to be of similar age and ability
Training and competition scheduled for a season or class	Training and competition scheduled for a season or class	Preferably, participation is regularly scheduled; demonstration, fundraising and featured events applied as a catalyst for ongoing activity
Differentiation: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Have attained sufficient & necessary sport-specific skills and tactics 2) No modifications of Official Special Olympics Sports Rules 3) Eligible to advance to higher levels of play beyond the Program level (such as Regional and World Games) 	Differentiation: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Not required to be of similar ability; teammates of higher ability serve as mentors to assist players of lower abilities 2) Rules modifications define players' roles, ensure meaningful involvement and prevent player dominance 3) No advancement beyond the Program level 	Differentiation: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Does not follow any prescribed training, competition and/or team composition requirements established by Special Olympics 2) No advancement beyond the Local level
Never comprised solely of individuals with disabilities	Never comprised solely of individuals with disabilities	Never comprised solely of individuals with disabilities
Awards based on place of finish within divisions	Program has choice of providing awards based on finish or participation (same award for all)	No awards are provided; however, recognition can be provided on a Program-by-Program basis
<p style="text-align: center;">Profile of Unified Sports Team Competitive Model</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Profile of Unified Sports Team Player Development Model</p>	Examples include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Physical Education Class 2) Partner's Club – playing sport recreationally as part of club activities 3) Intramural Team or Community Free/Open Play 4) Exhibitions / Demonstrations, one-day featured events like <i>Unified Sports Experiences</i> (purpose of which is awareness, exposure and/or fundraising)