



***Special Olympics***

**COACHING GUIDE**

Preparing Athletes for Competition

# Preparing Athletes for Competition

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## Psychological Considerations

Coaching goes well beyond teaching fundamental skills. Once the athlete has learned the basic skills of the game, they must then learn how to apply their skills, knowledge of the rules and etiquette of the game in preparation for competition.

Before any of that can happen, the athlete must enjoy the sport and want to play it. Establishing that from the outset will give the coach an immediate platform for learning. When the going gets tough, the coach can remind athletes that it is meant to be challenging and that sport is an activity they really want to be able to do. Without setting that groundwork, the concept of quitting becomes an option—the worst possible scenario in sport.

### **Tasks ⇒ Skills ⇒ Application ⇒ Competition**

Special Olympics athletes have been given the tasks or elements required to perform a skill. Skills are the fundamental abilities required for application to sport. They have developed a combination of skills to apply in preparation for competition. They are now ready for competition according to the rules and guidelines of the sport.

Athletes will develop sport confidence by following a simple to more complex skills training progression that allows the athlete to experience successful athletic achievement through repetition in settings similar to the competitive environment.

## Athlete Readiness

The readiness of the athlete must be determined in preparation for competition. Readiness of the athlete means athlete focused!

- ♦ Mental Readiness: Being a contender in the event, showing confidence and understanding strategy
- ♦ Physical Readiness: Being physically conditioned and trained in the skills required for competition

**Physical Readiness + Mental Readiness = Competition Readiness**

The Special Olympics Sports Skills Assessment and Daily Performance sheets are excellent resources for measurement of skill and competition readiness. These tools will help you determine the athlete's appropriate events.

Special Olympics offers many disciplines - sprints, long-distance running, jumps, throws and race walking and wheelchair events. Athletes must not only be placed in a level of competition that will challenge their skills and keep them motivated to continue their effort to surpass their personal bests, but they must also be placed in events that they like and enjoy. Positive motivation and participation can inspire the athlete to excel and gain sport confidence.

## Identify Sources of Motivation

Athletes first: Observe and know your athletes to determine why they participate in Special Olympics. Reward them accordingly.

### Types of Rewards

- ♦ Intrinsic: Athlete competes for the thrill and joy of the sport
- ♦ Extrinsic: Athlete competes for the reward

### Setting Goals (See Principles of Coaching section)

- ♦ Realistic, yet challenging long-term and short-term goals help motivate.
- ♦ Athletes with intellectual disabilities may be more motivated by short-term than long-term goals.
- ♦ Goals drive the action for the athlete in both training and competition.

# Preparing Athletes for Competition

## Psychological Considerations

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### Developing Sport Confidence

Sport confidence is gained through experiencing success, time and time again, in the same or similar situation. Sport confidence is one of the most important predictors of athletic achievement. Your coaching strategies should be devised around repetition in settings similar to the competitive environment.

1. Developing sport confidence in athletes helps to make participation fun and is critical to the athlete's motivation.
2. A considerable amount of anxiety is eliminated when athletes know what is expected of them and when they have to be prepared.
3. Mental preparation is just as important as skills training.
4. Progressing to more difficult skills increases the challenge.
5. Dropping back into easier skills increases one's confidence.

**The only two things an athlete can control are:**

**Attitude and Effort**

Place emphasis on the importance of improving a personal best and giving maximum effort at all times during training and competition.

- ♦ Reward the athletes when goals are achieved (verbal, nonverbal, tangible).
- ♦ Motivate and challenge the athlete through well-planned training sessions.
- ♦ Establish guidelines for acceptable behavior and expectations by creating positive cues and reinforcements.

### Anxiety and Stress Management

Anxiety and stress can be controlled through proper preparation. A winning attitude and confidence will equip an athlete with coping skills to handle his/her emotions when confronted with a stressful or anxious moment. Below are a few hints a well-prepared coach might consider to better prepare his athlete for competition.

- Repetition in a familiar environment can help alleviate a lot of stress when preparing the athlete for competition. Include mini meets in practice that simulate the competition.
- Provide athletes with additional competition opportunities at as many local-level meets as possible.
- Have athletes perform in front of spectators and peers.
- Make sure athletes are in proper events that they like and can display their talents and skills.
- Visit the track or stadium prior to competition. When possible, practice on the track or in the stadium before competition.
- Teach your athletes visual imagery to help them practice the event in their mind before competition.
- Review the rules of competition and event calls and strategies with your athletes.

## Preparing Athletes for Competition Winning and Losing

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### Winning and Losing

Coaches and athletes must remind themselves that winning is measured by how well they apply all their effort and maintain self-control in pressure situations. Winning means more than where you place at the finish line. An athlete is never a loser if he/she gives maximum effort.

#### **To that end, the first question a coach needs to ask before a competition is**

- ♦ “Are you ready to give it everything you’ve got?”

#### **The first questions after a competition needs to be**

- ♦ “How did that feel?”
- ♦ “Do you feel like you did your best?”

#### Coaching Tip

- Remember, positive thoughts yield positive results.

Well-prepared athletes will handle their performance and the performance of their competitors in a positive and sportsmanlike manner in accordance to the Athlete’s Code of Conduct and the Official Sports Rules for your sport. A losing outcome does not negatively impact the athletes’ confidence if the coach and athletes have been successful in developing a winning attitude.

The athlete’s effort, attitude and personal skills attainment must be rewarded and positively reinforced.

It is also important to remind athletes that the point of competing in Special Olympics is to prove to themselves and the rest of the world what they can do. The award ceremony is a chance for the world to see a group of skilled athletes celebrating their sport skills and enjoyment of competition.

Athletes of all ages, regardless of intellectual ability, enter competitions to do their best and hopefully to win. Is it all right to be disappointed when you do not win? Of course it is. But also, it is a chance to evaluate your performance and make a training commitment that will help you perform better next time.

## Handling Grief

Communication strategies by the coach, fellow athletes, families and friends will help an athlete handle grief or disappointment. Listen to what the athlete says and why he/she may be experiencing the grief. Offer positive switches - positive comment - correction - positive comment to take the athlete's attention away from his/her disappointment. Again, the athlete's effort, attitude and preparation should be emphasized, not the result of the competition.

It is important to not discount feelings of disappointment. It is appropriate to be disappointed when we lose a game or match. The challenge of the coach is to redirect that disappointment into a renewed commitment to training for the next competition or season.

Becoming obsessed with losing is not a healthy or natural reaction for anyone. If this occurs, the coach should contact a guardian if there is one or the local Special Olympics coordinator.

## Preparing Athletes for Competition

### Taking Athletes to Competition

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#### Taking Athletes to Competition

It is the coach's responsibility to have the athletes prepared physically and mentally for the competition. This involves ensuring that all uniforms are ready, all athletes have proper footwear, all equipment is present, meals and transportation are available and all entries are correct. Below are a few tips for coaches to follow before, during and after the game/meet/match.

#### Athlete Flow at Competitions

Coaches do not determine flow of athletes. Coaches have to know the athlete flow of a specific competition to ensure that athletes are where they need to be at the time that they need to be there.

#### Coaching Tip

- Athlete flow process is designed to make the athlete experience as smooth as possible from arriving at the competition to receiving awards to leaving the competition.

#### Before the Game/Meet/Match

- Make final check of all equipment and athlete needs.
- Be confident and relaxed.
- Be sure your athletes are warmed up, stretched and ready to compete.
- Be sure to have the proper shoes for each event.
- Be positive and upbeat but do not over excite.

#### At the Game/Meet/Match

- Encourage and support your athletes, but do not yell and scream. Keep calm and offer positive reinforcement at the competition.
- Restrict coaching from the bleachers to positive comments that athletes can use at the time of competition.
- Tell parents to be supportive but not to coach athletes.
- Keep substitutions simple. Have substitutes ready for relays in case of injuries or no-shows.
- Commit yourself to equal participation throughout the season.
- Give different athletes the chance to compete in new events for which they have trained. Be a coach who allows the athlete to progress to new levels.
- Make sure that the athletes have plenty of fluids.

#### After the Game/Meet/Match

- Say "well done" or "good effort" to all your athletes when appropriate.
- Be sure to collect all the equipment from each athlete.
- Cool down after competition to prevent soreness.
- Spend time reviewing the athletes' performances and prepare some useful comments for the beginning of the next practice.

### Divisioning in Special Olympics Sports

The fundamental difference between Special Olympics competitions and those of other sports organizations is that athletes of all ability levels are encouraged to participate, and every athlete is recognized for his/her performance. Competitions are structured so that athletes compete with other athletes of similar ability in equitable divisions. Historically, Special Olympics has suggested that all divisions be created so that the variance between the highest and lowest scores within that division does not differ by more than 10 percent. This 10 percent statement is not a rule but should be used as a guideline for establishing equitable divisions when the number of athletes competing is appropriate.

### Responsibilities of the Athletes

As we mentioned earlier, sportsmanship is important in developing a well-rounded athlete. Athletes are expected to follow the Special Olympics Official Sport Rules and the Athlete's Code of Conduct. Athletes who break the rules may be disqualified from further participation.

Athletes are also expected to give maximum effort when competing. This is the only way the divisioning process can work as it was intended. Athletes who do not participate honestly and with maximum effort in all preliminary trials and/or finals violate the true spirit of competition and may even be disqualified from competition.

### Responsibilities of the Coach

Coaches have an important role in an athlete's life. Next to family members, coaches interact more with athletes than anyone. In many instances, coaches become like family. Therefore, coaches must place the health and safety of Special Olympics athletes above all else. They too must follow the Official Sport Rules and the Coaches Code of Conduct.

Coaches are also critical in helping competition management teams make divisioning work. Divisioning works best when coaches submit preliminary scores. This helps athletes get into the proper division as well as gain additional competition experience.

### How Divisioning is Implemented

An athlete's ability is the primary factor in divisioning Special Olympics competitions. The ability of an athlete or team is determined by an entry score from a prior competition or the result of a seeding round or preliminary event at the competition itself. Other factors that are significant in establishing competitive divisions are age and sex.

Ideally, competition is enhanced when each division accommodates 3-8 competitors or teams of similar ability. In some cases, the number of athletes or teams within a competition will be insufficient to achieve this goal. The following describes the sequential process for creating equitable divisions.

## Divisioning Process for Individual Sports

### Step 1: Divide Athletes by Gender

Divide athletes into two groups based upon gender. Female athletes will compete against other female athletes, male athletes against other male athletes. When a relay team consists of both male and female athletes, the team is considered a "male" team and competes in a male division.

## Preparing Athletes for Competition

### Divisioning in Special Olympics Sports

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#### Step 2: Divide Athletes by Age

The next step is to divide the group by athlete's ages which be determined by the athlete's age on the opening date of the competition.

Age Groups
8-11
12-15
16-21
22-29
30+

#### Step 3: Divide Athletes by Ability

To complete the divisioning process, divide the group according to their performance marks. In some instances age groups need to be broadened. In those cases, athletes within the new age groups will be re-ranked and grouped into divisions. This process must be repeated until the highest and lowest scores within each division are as similar as possible.

### Divisioning Process for Team Sports

#### Step 1: Divide Team by Gender

Divide teams into two groups based upon gender. Female teams shall compete against other female teams and male teams shall compete against other male teams. Mixed gender teams are permissible and shall compete against other mixed gender teams or, if there are not enough mixed gender teams, against male teams.

Teams shall compete against other teams of the same gender, unless there is only one male or one female team within the competition. That team shall be divisioned with teams of the opposite gender who are of similar age and ability.

#### Step 2: Divide Athletes by Age

The age group of a team is determined by the age of the oldest athlete on that team on the opening date of the competition. Divide male and female teams into the age groups listed below. An additional group may be established if there are a sufficient number of teams in the "22 and over" age group.

Age Groups
15 and under
16-21
22 and over

#### Step 3: Divide Athletes by Ability

All Special Olympics team sport competitions shall utilize the sports specific skill assessment tests and a preliminary seeding round to assess the level of ability of the participating teams.

## Preparing Athletes for Competition Divisioning in Special Olympics Sports

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Group teams according to ability based on the skills assessment tests and results from the preliminary seeding round. Create divisions of no more than eight teams by applying age groups to the teams within each ability group. If you do not have enough athletes in an age group, age groups may be combined to create divisions.

If there are only two male or two female teams within the competition, these teams shall compete against each other.

If there is only one team within an age or ability group, that team must be divisioned with other teams, regardless of age or ability.