



Seven (7) Criteria for Special Olympics Unified Sports Success

Special Olympics adopted Unified Sports in 1989 to expand sports opportunities for athletes seeking new challenges while dramatically increasing their inclusion 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.

It is important to incorporate all seven (7) of the criteria. If you do only some of them, chances for success are greatly diminished.

- 1) **Principle of Meaningful Involvement** – This is the most critical determinant of success and the coach and all of the players must follow it. *Fundamentally, the principle of meaningful involvement ensures that every player is given an opportunity to contribute to the success of his or her team through their unique skills and qualities.* This means that every teammate: (a) demonstrates sufficient sport-specific skills and game understanding; (b) plays a valued role on the team that emphasizes his or her personal talents; and (c) has an opportunity to play without a heightened risk of injury.
- 2) **Selection of appropriate sport** – A variety of factors influence the determination of which sport is chosen for Unified Sports training and competition. Some of these factors include athlete and partner interest, age and ability levels of potential athletes and partners, available facilities and equipment, availability of qualified coaches, finances 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 and adopts the principles of Special Olympics and Unified Sports, and has knowledge of the rules, techniques, strategies and training regimens of the selected sport.
- 4) **Selection of appropriate teammates** – It is fundamental to the Special Olympics experience that each participant on a team has the ability and opportunity to contribute to the team's success and embraces the principle of meaningful involvement. Team members should have the necessary skills to participate on a Unified Sports team without causing undue risk of injury to themselves or others. Additionally, team members should be matched by age and ability as specifically defined by the sport. All players on a Unified Sports team make the commitment to attend every practice, support each other as equal teammates, and demonstrate respect and sportsmanship.
- 5) **Quality training and frequent competition leads to a culminating event** – Unified Sports teams shall have a minimum of ten weeks of training and competition (practices, 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** – Four levels of support are critical to start and sustain the Unified Sports program. (a) The *Program* (state, province or country) provides funding, training of coaches and competition management and a culminating event. (b) The Local Program is responsible for training athletes and partners, conducting local competition and securing facilities, equipment and uniforms. (c) *Coaches* are responsible for gaining knowledge, training and coaching athletes and partners and ensuring that they have frequent opportunities to compete. (d) Lastly, the spectator provides acknowledgement, engagement and acceptance – having cheering fans in the stands can be crucial to the motivation of a team, especially a Unified Sports team.