



**Special Olympics Unified Sports®** is a program that combines Special Olympics athletes and athletes without intellectual disabilities (partners) on sports teams for training and competition. Age and ability matching are on a sport-by-sport basis. Unified Sports is an important program because it expands sports opportunities for athletes seeking new challenges and dramatically increases inclusion in the community. The Unified Sports program was launched throughout the United States in 1989, after two years of field-testing. Unified Sports is now a global program and sports include basketball, bowling, distance running, football (soccer), softball and volleyball.

**Unified Sports is a unique and important program because it:**

- Integrates athletes with and without intellectual disabilities in a setting where all athletes are challenged to improve skills
- Provides a valuable sports opportunity to individuals with intellectual disabilities who are not presently involved with Special Olympics, especially those with mild intellectual disabilities and those in communities where there are not enough Special Olympics athletes to conduct team sports
- Prepares athletes with higher level skills for participation in school or community sports
- Increases public awareness of the spirit and skills of individuals with intellectual disabilities
- Enables Special Olympics athletes' families to participate as team members or coaches on Unified Sports teams
- Enables athletes to develop friendships and an understanding of each other's capabilities through a spirit of equality and team unity.

**How it Works**

A Special Olympics Unified Sports program can be conducted in a variety of settings, including:

- A program organized by a Special Olympics group
- A community or church sports program, such as an adult softball league or YMCA volleyball league
- A interscholastic or intramural after-school league at the junior high or high school level
- A part of the league system at a local bowling center
- An independent league sponsored by businesses or civic groups
- A program in cooperation with a local recreation and park association

Athletes with intellectual disabilities who participate in Unified Sports may or may not be involved in the local Special Olympics programs. Athletes without intellectual disabilities can be recruited from schools, corporations, civic groups, or other community organizations. These athletes must be similar in age and skill level to the athletes with intellectual disabilities who participate in the program. Unified Sports teams are coached by volunteer coaches who attend Special Olympics coaches training in the appropriate sport. Teams may participate at Special Olympics Area, State/Province, National and World Games.

**Goals of Special Olympics Unified Sports:**

- **Sport skill development.** Under the direction of qualified coaches, participants will have the opportunity to develop sports skills and to prepare themselves for participation in other community sports programs.
- **Competition experiences.** Athletes benefit from physical and mental challenges participating in a variety of competitions organized by Special Olympics or by community sports organizations.
- **Meaningful inclusion.** Unified Sports rules and guidelines on age and ability grouping help ensure that all teammates play and important, meaningful and valued roles on the team.
- **Community-based participation.** Unified Sports programs have found valuable partners in schools, Parks and Recreation departments, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, and many more community sports organizations. These partnerships help further include athletes in their community.
- **Friendship and socialization.** The program provides a forum for positive social interaction between teammates and often leads to long-lasting friendships.
- **Transition and choice.** Unified Sports programs help schools meet the transition mandates of I.D.E.A. and provide a choice for athletes in and out of Special Olympics.