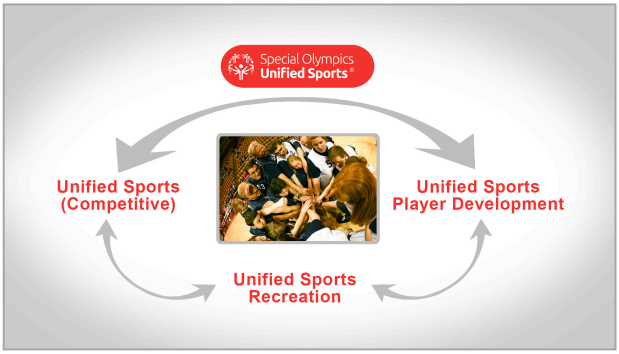
11 September 2012

Overview

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: competitive Unified Sports, 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.

Special Olympics Unified Sports promotes social inclusion through shared sport training and competition experiences for individuals with and without intellectual disabilities. Unified Sports has proven to be highly effective in achieving social inclusion. Athletes feel a sense of belonging; they can meaningfully interact with others, develop mutually rewarding relationships, are recognized as contributors and are received with acceptance and respect.

Research studies by Siperstein (2010) and Özer (2011) have confirmed the positive social impact of Unified Sports on individuals with and without intellectual disabilities as well as their communities. Unified Sports is effective in decreasing the problem behaviors of individuals with intellectual disabilities and improving attitudes of individuals without disabilities toward participants with disabilities. Unified Sports helps increase the skills necessary for individuals with intellectual disabilities to be accepted and fulfilled socially (developing meaningful relationships, being accepted and respected and being better prepared for community living).



All three models, defined below, have social inclusion as the core outcome; however, the structure and function of each model varies.

Unified Sports (Competitive)

The Unified Sports competitive model combines Special Olympics athletes (individuals with intellectual disabilities) and partners (individuals without intellectual disabilities) as teammates on sport teams for training and competition. Two things differentiate the competitive Unified Sports model from the other two models: 1) all athletes and partners on a Unified Sports competitive team must have attained the necessary sport-specific skills and tactics to compete without modification of the current Special Olympics Official Sports Rules; and 2) teams that participate in this model may be eligible for advancement to Regional and World Games. A Unified Sports team is an inclusive sports program with approximately equal numbers of athletes and partners. Unified Sports teams should never be comprised solely of people with disabilities. Athletes and partners should be of similar age and ability in team sports. However, a greater variance in age and ability is allowed in specific sports such as golf. Refer to Article 1 of the Official Special Olympics Sports Rules for more details regarding age and ability matching by sport.

Unified Sports Player Development

The Unified Sports Player Development model combines approximately equal numbers of Special Olympics athletes (individuals with intellectual disabilities) and partners (individuals without intellectual disabilities) as teammates on sports teams for training and competition. What differentiates Unified Sports Player Development from the other two models is: 1) teammates are not required to be of similar abilities, and 2) teammates of higher abilities serve as mentors to assist teammates of lower abilities in developing sport-specific skills and tactics, and in successfully participating in a cooperative team environment. Athletes and partners should be of similar age. However, a greater variance in age is allowed in specific sports such as bocce. (Refer to Article 1 of the Official Special Olympics Sports Rules for more details regarding age matching by sport.) Because of differences in abilities, rules modifications are necessary and designed to both ensure meaningful involvement of all teammates and define for higher ability players their roles as mentors so they do not dominate play. Each Program is given the opportunity to establish rules modifications that fulfill these outcomes.

Unified Sports Recreation

Unified Sports Recreation consists of inclusive recreational sports opportunities for Special Olympics athletes (individuals with intellectual disabilities) and partners without intellectual disabilities. What differentiates this model from the other two is that this model does not follow any prescribed training, competition and/or team composition requirements established by Special Olympics. These recreational opportunities may take place in partnership with schools, sport clubs, the community and other private or public organizations as introductory one-day events, exhibitions or demonstrations (including *Unified Sports Experiences)* or ongoing activities such as physical education classes and intramurals.

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