Athlete-Centered Coaching Guide

What Special Olympics Athletes Want From Their Coaches

As athletes, we want our coaches to be dedicated to the team by committing to learn more, not only about their sport but about the athletes. We want our coaches to know our individual strengths, weaknesses and the personality traits that make us unique from our fellow teammates.

As an athlete, I expect my coaches to:

- Put me in a position to be successful and challenge me to help realize my potential.
- To teach us teamwork and unselfish play and to know our limits keeping in mind the “safety first” rule.
- To make playing and being part of a team a fun and enjoyable experience.
- To be open to change, because a drill may work for some of the team but not for all of the team.
- Know the rules of the sport with regards to both the sport-specific governing body and Special Olympic standards.

By Matt Millett, Special Olympics athlete and member of the 2013 Special Olympics International Coaching Fellowship

What follows are the characteristics, behavior and examples of intellectual disability. In addition, there will be a section focusing solely on athlete behaviors and strategies to effectively deal with typical behaviors and improve learning. Why is this important? This provides a little more information about the individual with intellectual disability … what may be going on and what to do in order to assist each individual in reaching more closely to her/his capabilities. This is just a guide of possibilities. You will need to use as many resources as possible when meeting and learning about your athletes. Resources include: the athlete’s parents, teachers, employers and anyone else who may be working with your athlete in any capacity. Each of them is a valuable resource. It is important to remember that athletes are people with various interests, likes and dislikes and varying ways of expressing these.
# Table of Contents

What are Intellectual Disabilities? 3  
   Conceptual Skills 3  
   Social Skills 3  
   Practical Skills 3  
   Characteristics Affecting Athlete Performance in Training and Competition 3  
Examples of Intellectual Disabilities 4  
   Down Syndrome 4  
   Autism Spectrum Disorders 4  
Co-occurring Conditions Commonly Associated with Intellectual Disabilities 5  
   Difficulty Processing Information (Sensory Integration Dysfunction) 5  
   Atlanto-axial Instability 5  
   Orthopedic Impairments 6  
   Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) 7  
Participation by Persons Who Are Blood-Borne Contagious Disease Carriers 7  
Psychological Considerations Related to Learning and Recommended Teaching Strategies 8  
   Motivation 8  
   Perception 9  
   Comprehension 9  
   Memory 10  
Developmental Appropriateness 10  
Behavior Modification (refer to Behavior Characteristics Grid) 11  
   Observation of Athlete's Behavior During Training or Competition 11  
   Redirecting Undesirable Behavior 12  
Communication Considerations When Working With Special Olympics Athletes 12  
Teaching Sportsmanship and Teamwork 13  
   Athlete Conduct 13  
   After Competition 14  
   Post-Competition Team Meeting 15  
Coaching Unified Sports 16  
Behavior Characteristics Grid 18  
References Cited 25
What are Intellectual Disabilities?

According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD), intellectual disability is characterized by significant limitations both in intellectual functioning (reasoning, learning, problem-solving) and adaptive behavior, which covers a range of everyday social and practical skills. This disability originates before age 18. People with intellectual disabilities are just like everyone else in terms of uniqueness. Disabilities impact each person differently so it is important to get to know your athletes personally. The information in this document will provide a broad overview of elements of intellectual disabilities to help you understand the wide variety of athletes you will coach.

Adaptive behaviors, as defined by the AAIDD (2013), include actions and routines performed by people in their daily lives and include three categories: conceptual skills, social skills and practical skills. A summary of some elements that comprise these categories is below (AAIDD, 2013):

**Conceptual Skills**
- Language and literacy
- Financial competence and understanding
- Concepts of time
- Self-direction

**Social Skills**
- Interpersonal skills
- Self-esteem
- Social responsibility
- Gullibility
- Naïveté
- An ability to follow rules

**Practical Skills**
- Activities of daily living (self-care)
- Occupational skills
- Schedule/routines
- Travel/transportation

**Characteristics Affecting Athlete Performance in Training and Competition**
- Athletes’ confidence levels may be low
- Athletes may be hesitant to try new things
- Athletes may be overwhelmed by a large amount of new information at once (such as multiple steps of a new skill being presented at the same time)
- Many athletes with intellectual disabilities view each learning experience as a new one, instead of attaching new experiences to prior-learned ideas or knowledge.
Examples of Intellectual Disabilities

Down syndrome
People with Down syndrome have 47 chromosomes rather than 46, which results in fewer body and brain cells than people without Down syndrome (National Down Syndrome Society, 2012). People with Down syndrome vary widely in personality, ability, appearance and intellectual functioning. Because symptoms of Down syndrome differ in degree and occurrence, it is difficult to predict what coaching an athlete with Down syndrome will be like without getting to know the athlete.

BEHAVIORAL CONSIDERATIONS
Many athletes with Down syndrome:

- Can communicate very well using the spoken word
- May be mature socially
- May have difficulty expressing themselves

PHYSICAL CONSIDERATIONS
Athletes with Down syndrome may:

- Be short in stature and have short legs/arms in relation to torso
- Have poor muscle tone and very loose joints
- Have poor equilibrium (balance)
- Develop Alzheimer’s or symptoms of dementia at an earlier age (Maatta, et.al. 2011, Beaumont & Carey 2011)

Autism Spectrum Disorders
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is defined as a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal communication, nonverbal communication and social interactions (Autism Research Institute, 2013). As with athletes with Down syndrome, athletes with Autism Spectrum Disorders will differ greatly. Understanding a disability goes a long way, but getting to know each athlete as an individual is essential to good coaching.

ATHLETES WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS MAY (AUTISM RESEARCH INSTITUTE, 2013):

- Appear non-responsive to outside stimuli or demonstrate unusual responses to sensory experiences, such as hearing a referee’s whistle, seeing the lights of a scoreboard, or feeling the rubber of a basketball
- Engage in repetitive activity
- Resist change in the environment or routine
- Exhibit self-stimulatory behaviors, such as hand flapping or rocking
- Not initiate conversations with peers/adults
Co-occurring Conditions Commonly Associated with Intellectual Disabilities

Difficulty Processing Information (Sensory Integration Dysfunction)
Some athletes may have difficulty processing information from the five senses and responding appropriately to the information provided by the senses. Athletes with this disorder may appear clumsy, may have difficulty calming down after an activity, may withdraw from touch, may be overly active or sluggish and may even be hypersensitive to clothing (uniforms).

Coaching tips

Some athletes might have sensory challenges that make grass on their skin feel very uncomfortable. You might notice an athlete avoiding stretches that involve sitting on the grass. If a conversation with the athlete reveals that they can’t stand the feel of grass on their skin, suggest they wear long sweat pants during stretches with shorts underneath so they can take the long pants off if they get too hot during the rest of practice.

Some athletes might have sensory challenges that make important sports elements (like whistles) overwhelming. It is important to help athletes become more accustomed to these elements over time so the athlete can respond appropriately to them during competition. Introduce athletes to stimulants they might have difficulty with gradually.

Atlanto-axial Instability
According to Section 6.02.G of the Special Olympics General Rules:

- Medical research indicates that up to 15% of individuals with Down syndrome have a mal-alignment of the cervical vertebrae C-1 and C-2 in the neck known as Atlanto-axial instability. Such individuals are prone to possible injury if they participate in activities that hyperextend or radically flex the neck or upper spine. Thus, every Accredited Program must take the following precautions before permitting athletes with Down syndrome to participate in certain physical activities:
  - (1) Athletes with Down syndrome may participate in most Special Olympics sports training and competition, but shall not be permitted to participate in any activities which, by their nature, result in hyper-extension, radical flexion or direct pressure on the neck or upper spine, unless the requirements of subsections (2) and (3) below are satisfied. Such non-permitted sports training and competition activities include: butterfly stroke and diving starts in swimming, pentathlon, high
jump, squat lifts, equestrian sports, artistic gymnastics, football (soccer), alpine skiing, snowboarding, judo and any warm-up exercise placing undue stress on the head and neck.

- (2) An athlete with Down syndrome may be permitted to participate in the activities described in subsection (1) above if that athlete is examined (including x-ray views of full extension and flexion of neck) by a physician who has been briefed on the nature of the Atlanto-axial instability condition, and who determines, based on the results of that examination, that the athlete does not have an Atlanto-axial instability condition.

- (3) An athlete with Down syndrome who has been diagnosed by a physician as having an Atlanto-axial instability condition may nevertheless be permitted to participate in the activities described in subsection (1) above if the athlete, or the parent or guardian of a minor athlete, confirms in writing his or her decision to proceed with these activities notwithstanding the risks created by the Atlanto-axial instability, and two Licensed Medical Professionals certify in writing that they have explained these risks to the athlete and his/her parent or guardian, and that the athlete's condition does not, in their judgment, preclude the athlete from participating in Special Olympics. These statements and certifications shall be documented and provided to Accredited Programs using the standardized form approved by SOI, entitled "Special Release for Athletes with Atlanto-axial Instability," and any revisions of that form, approved by SOI.

**Orthopedic Impairments**

An orthopedic impairment is a severe impairment of the skeletal system and associated structures of muscles and ligaments that negatively impact quality of life or the ability to independently perform activities of daily living (ADLs). The term includes impairments caused by birth defects, impairments caused by disease (such as poliomyelitis, bone tuberculosis), and impairments from other causes (such as cerebral palsy, amputations and fractures or burns that cause contractures). Orthopedic impairments can be classified in three categories: neuromotor impairments (such as spina bifida and cerebral palsy), degenerative diseases (such as muscular dystrophy) and musculoskeletal diseases (rheumatoid arthritis). Symptoms of orthopedic impairments include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Abnormal reflex development
- Difficulty in coordinating and integrating basic movement patterns
- Seizures
- Speech and language disorders
- Sensory impairments (visual motor control)
Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2013), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is a condition that describes athletes who display hyperactive and/or inattentive behaviors; have difficulty attending to a task at hand due to a heightened awareness to external stimuli; and tend to be impulsive. Symptoms of ADHD include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Inattention
- Hyperactivity
- Poor listening skills
- Restlessness
- Impulsiveness

SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH ADHD:

- Inappropriate responses to new or challenging social/emotional situations that they may not be prepared to handle
- Difficulty in selecting appropriate responses
- Inadequate practical social skills
- May avoid participation
- May be verbally disruptive
- May seek constant reassurance
- May exhibit tantrums

Participation by Persons Who Are Blood-Borne Contagious Disease Carriers

No Accredited Program or Games Organizing Committee (GOC) may exclude or isolate from participation in any Special Olympics training or competition any athlete who is known to be a carrier of a blood-borne contagious infection or virus, or otherwise discriminate against such athletes solely because of that medical condition. In view of the risk that one or more Special Olympics athletes may have a blood-borne contagious infection or virus, in conducting Special Olympics training and competition events, Accredited Programs and GOC's shall follow so-called "Universal Precautions" or "Universal Blood and Body Fluid Precautions" for every exposure to any person's blood, saliva or other bodily fluid. SOI shall keep Accredited Programs apprised of the written Universal Precautions which meet the requirements of this Section 2.05 in the General Rules. For more information about universal precautions, coaches are encouraged to visit: http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/bbp/universal.html.
Psychological Considerations Related to Learning and Recommended Teaching Strategies

There are four psychological considerations related to an athlete’s ability to learn: motivation, perception, comprehension and memory.

Motivation

For challenges in motivation, coaches can help athletes gain and maintain interest. The following suggestions for engaging and/or maintaining athletes’ interest stem from a 2012 study of elite Massachusetts Special Olympics coaches:

- Create competitive scenarios for athletes during drills and other activities.
- Reference local sports teams and well-known athletes when delivering instruction or feedback.
- Use encouraging phrases like “well done” and “I know you can do it.” Praise effort when athletes are practicing and refining skills.
- Use encouraging gestures like high-fives and fist-bumps to encourage and praise effort when athletes are practicing and refining skills.
- Keep drill lines short to maintain athletes’ engagement.

In addition to the suggestions made above, coaches are encouraged to:

- Keep the duration of drills short (about 8-10 minutes) to maintain athletes’ interest and attention.
- Make short-term goals with athletes before each practice (goals can be related to sport performance or behavior).
- Occasionally build athletes’ skill strengths into drills and scrimmages so they experience feelings of success and confidence when applying them in the context of performing the sport.

Coaching tips

Astacio was very motivated at the beginning of practices, but lost enthusiasm as practices progressed. After a conversation with the coach, it was discovered that Astacio felt he could never win at the drills, which left him feeling discouraged. The coach modified practices to review the skills that Astacio was good at first, which built his confidence for the remainder of practice. Finding success at the beginning of the practice motivated Astacio to actively participate in the rest of practice.
Perception
For challenges in perception, coaches can help athletes process information about the sport. Coaches are encouraged to:

- **Provide equipment or other accommodations for athletes with physical impairments that may affect perception, such as visual or auditory disabilities.**
- **Intentionally connect new concepts to previously learned ideas in order to 1) help athletes remember what they already know and 2) help athletes correctly organize information in their brains. For instance, if a coach teaches her basketball athletes how to do set shots on Monday, she can refer to the hand position and shooting motion of a set shot when she teaches athletes how to make foul shots on Friday.**

Comprehension
For challenges in comprehension, coaches can help athletes understand the sport in which they are participating and perform requisite skills. Several methods can be used to develop the skills and knowledge needed to compete successfully. Coaches are encouraged to:

- **Apply the appropriate level of instruction. This is often done through trial and error. It is important to note that every athlete will present with their own subset of skills and abilities, even those with the same diagnoses/disorder.**
- **Realize that frequent repetition and reinforcement over time will improve the athlete's skill development.**
- **Since some athletes have difficulty in generalizing skills, provide opportunities for athletes to utilize new skills in appropriate situations. Coaches can provide opportunities for participation in competition-like scenarios via scrimmages or other games that require athletes to feel time pressure, use decision-making skills or employ newly-learned technical skills.**
- **When giving athletes feedback, coaches can ask them to verbally summarize or physically demonstrate what they learned. Coaches should periodically allow athletes time to rest their bodies and minds by providing settling time. Settling time can be given in the form of water breaks; suggestions that athletes remove themselves from practice for a few minutes; or by allowing athletes to independently decide to remove themselves from practice for a few minutes. Coaches can “scaffold” their lessons by giving a lot of support to athletes when they first learn a skill and then reducing supports as skill level increases. Coaches can “chunk” and “chain” content by breaking large concepts into smaller pieces (“chunking”) and progressively teaching each “piece” in a progressing sequence (“chaining”).**
Coaching tips

Structure your season to use early practices to teach basic skills and provide opportunities for team play. Then build on those basic skills and team play each following practice. Planning the whole season of practices will make it easier to modify your practices to fit the unique needs of your team as they present and still ensure you will be ready for competition.

Memory

For challenges with memory, coaches can help athletes remember and perform skills at the appropriate time. Coaches are encouraged to repeat and refer to previously learned skills often and in different scenarios/contexts. This will increase muscle memory in the athletes, freeing up brain power to focus on the next level of skill/game development.

Developmental Appropriateness

When working with any athlete population, it is important for coaches to ask athletes to perform technical skills (fundamentals) and tactical skills (game or event strategies) that are developmentally appropriate relative to athletes’ physical and intellectual capabilities. Introducing skills that are too advanced for athletes’ capabilities can lead to unsafe sport environments and frustration. For instance, it would be inappropriate for a soccer coach working with 6-year-olds to ask her athletes to practice slide tackles, because the physical and intellectual processing skills required to successfully perform slide tackles are not yet present in 6-year-olds.

Conversely, asking athletes to perform skills that are not challenging and do not promote skill development can lead to boredom and regression of skill level. A challenge faced by every sport coach is to identify technical and tactical skills that are developmentally appropriate and present a motivating (versus frustrating) challenge for athletes.

When thinking about coaching Special Olympics athletes, it is important to keep athletes’ chronological and developmental ages in mind. Chronological age may (but not always) help coaches predict the presence of certain biological milestones,
such as puberty. Developmental age, a measure of physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional development, can yield an age that reflects the presence of any developmental giftedness or intellectual delay in an athlete. Taking these respective “ages” into consideration can help a coach identify techniques and game or event strategies that are appropriate for athletes to perform. However, it is important to note that lower developmental ages do not automatically disqualify athletes from having high athletic ability or potential.

Behavior Modification (refer to Behavior Characteristics Grid)

Observation of Athlete’s Behavior During Training or Competition
When coaching athletes with intellectual disabilities, observe specific athlete behaviors in order to determine the coaching strategies and structure needed to address behaviors that may inhibit the athletes’ participation in training or competitive environments:

- Entering the site (environmental entrance): (behavior of the athlete when he/she comes to the training site or competition venue): Is the athlete in control of his or her body and emotions? Note: athlete control may look different in different scenarios and environments.
- Leaving the site (environmental exit): (behavior of the athlete as he/she leaves the training or competition site): Is the athlete in control of his or her body and mind, especially with regard to reactions to winning or losing? Note: athlete control may look different in different scenarios and environments.
- Active participation: Is the athlete in control (attentive, focusing on the task, persistent in completing the task and handles feedback without incident)?
- Non-active behavior (behavior that emerges as the athlete waits for a turn or needs to watch a demonstration): Is the athlete in control and able to inhibit negative impulse behavior? Note: coaches are encouraged to have a plan to keep athletes bodies and minds engaged during ALL stages of drills and activities.
- Competitive attitude: A negative/positive mental position or feeling an athlete has regarding any activity that takes the form of a “contest” between individual athletes or teams of athletes.
- Positive participation feedback: While engaged in a task or immediately following completion of a task the athlete exhibits positive feedback, i.e., smiling, expression of joy, laughter, cheering, high-fiving, etc.
- Negative participation feedback: While engaged in a task or immediately following completion of a task the athlete exhibits negative feedback, i.e., cries, screams, swears, tantrums, runs away, strikes out at a coach/official/another athlete/spectator, etc. Note: the responses to different competition outcomes should be discussed and rehearsed prior to the competition. Reinforced participation: Athlete performs satisfactorily when continually reinforced by the coach, another athlete, parent, etc. but performance is significantly affected negatively when reinforcement is not given. Note: reinforcement should be slowly withdrawn; intermittent reinforcement is best. Intrinsic participation: The athlete performs tasks without reinforcement and appears to be self-motivated to perform. Social interaction with peers: are the interactions positive or negative? Social interaction with coach: are the interactions positive or negative?
Redirecting Undesirable Behavior

Redirection for many of the negative interactions should be consistent. All behaviors are driven by a need to get something (praise/reward) or avoid something (non-preferred activity). When we know what drives a behavior, we can develop a plan for changing it. Change is slow and steady if it is to be long lasting.

Communication Considerations When Working With Special Olympics Athletes

The best way to assess athletes’ enjoyment, fears and concerns is to speak with them often; check in with each athlete frequently during practice. If possible, coaches are encouraged to speak with guardians/parents/caregivers to assess their perceptions of athletes’ enjoyment.

It is recommended that coaches employ several communication methods when conveying information to athletes. Communication methods include:

- **Verbal communication**
- **Gesture cues** (thumbs up, high-fives)
- **Pointing to pictures. Pictures can be very simple; free apps are available for download on smart phones and tablets**

When communicating with athletes, coaches are encouraged to:

- **Be respectful:** Speak to your athletes the way you would want to be spoken to. Use appropriate eye contact, respect personal spaces, give athletes time to respond fully and use positive language.
- **Be clear:** Use words that an athlete can understand or that an athlete has a point of reference such as “see the ball” as opposed to “find the target.”
- **Be concrete:** Use words that are specific to something physical and/or real. Since athletes have a cognitive delay in processing information (especially words), the challenge is to make concepts concrete. For example, when teaching the 3-second lane in basketball, a coach can use the physical words of “hot” and “cold” -- t. “Hot” refers to the lane on offense; the athlete will burn up if he stops in the lane and not move through it. “Cold” refers to the lane at the defensive end of the court; that lane is cool and the athlete’s friend.
- **Be concise:** Use a few descriptive “keywords” or cues. Do not use long sentences or multi-part instructions. For example: “Reach for the sky.”
- **Be consistent:** Use the same cue words for the same actions.
- **Make words command-oriented:** Verbally reinforce the athlete immediately after a desired action. Make the reinforcement action-oriented and specific to the skill.
- **Make sure an athlete is looking at you and can hear you when making a coaching point. When needed, physically prompt an athlete to look at you.**
- **Ask athletes questions rather than always providing directions. Encourage athletes to think for themselves. Verify athlete responses.**

**A note on cues**
Attach simple cues to important elements of technical and tactical skills. The following suggestions for using cues come from a 2012 study of elite Massachusetts Special Olympics coaches (Sherlock-Shangraw, 2013).

Following initial instruction of a sport skill or concept, coaches can use the following types of tactical and technical cues to simplify feedback and make communication more efficient:

- **Verbal cues:** simple, short phrases that include sport-specific terminology.
- **Gesture cues:** coach-demonstrated physical movements that remind athletes of the correct way to perform a skill (often paired with verbal cues).
- **Touch cues:** taps on the athlete’s body to elicit movement. Be sure the athlete is comfortable being touched before using touch cues.

**A note on people first language**
Communicating respectfully about and to your athletes is the first step in gaining their trust and creating a mutually respectful team. Always put the athlete first and leave their disability behind. Avoid labeling athletes in any negative way, but do feel free to respectfully ask an athlete questions about their disability. When in doubt, always ask an athlete how he or she prefers to talk about their disability. It is important to understand your athletes fully and understanding their disability is part of that.

**Teaching Sportsmanship and Teamwork**

**Athlete Conduct**
The coach is responsible for keeping athletes under control. Do so by setting a good example and by disciplining when necessary. Set team rules for good behavior. If athletes attempt to cheat, fight, argue, badger, yell disparaging remarks, and the like, it is your responsibility to confront the misbehavior. Initially, it may mean removing athletes immediately from the competition or practice, letting them calm down, and then speaking to them quietly, explaining that their behavior is not acceptable for your team and if they want to participate, they must not repeat the action. Allow athletes to return to play when ready, able and in control of their emotions.
Consider team rules in these areas of competition conduct:

- **Athlete language**
- **Athlete behavior**
- **Interactions with officials or judges**
- **Discipline for misbehavior**

Respect opponents and officials. Without them, there wouldn’t be a competition. Officials help provide a fair and safe experience for athletes and, as appropriate, help them learn the sport. Opponents provide opportunities for your team to test itself, improve, and excel.

You and your team should show respect for opponents by giving your best efforts. Showing respect means being civil to your opponents. Don’t allow your athletes to “trash talk” or taunt an opponent. This behavior is disrespectful to the spirit of the competition and to the opponent. Immediately remove athletes from a competition or practice if they trash talk or taunt an opponent. When appropriate, request that violations be called. Enforcing the rules and calling violations assists athletes in maintaining a high level of their skills and reinforces their learning the rules. As long as the calls are being made consistently on both sides, most of your officiating concerns will be alleviated.

---

**Coaching Tips**

*Keep your demeanor even and positive, conduct your responsibilities the same regardless of the score, help correct your athletes’ errors in a positive manner, and continue to offer encouragement to each athlete.*

---

**After Competition**

When the competition is over, join your team in congratulating the coaches and athletes of the opposing team, then be sure to thank the officials. Check on any injuries athletes may have sustained during the competition and inform athletes of how to care for them. Be prepared to speak with the officials about any problems that occurred during the competition. Then hold a brief meeting—or “team circle”—to ensure that your athletes are on an even keel, whether they won or lost. Do a “Cool Down,” stretching all major muscles. This can either be done separately or incorporated into your team circle while you address the team.

When celebrating a victory, make sure your team does so in a way that doesn’t show disrespect for the opponents. It is okay and appropriate to be happy and celebrate a win, but do not allow your athletes to taunt the opponents or boast about their victory. Keep winning in perspective. Winning and losing are a part of life, not just a part of sport. If athletes can handle both equally well, they’ll be successful in whatever they do. Athletes’ self-worth should not be tied to the win or the loss. Recognize and reward efforts and attitudes.

Athletes are competitors, and competitors are disappointed in defeat. If your team has made a winning effort, let them know this. After a loss, help them keep their chins up and maintain a positive attitude that will carry over into the next practice and contest.
Coaching Tips

Immediately following a competition, regardless of the outcome, stay positive. When the athletes return to practice after a competition, make certain that you let the previous competition go, learn from the experience, make needed corrections, and focus on the next opponent and next competition.

Post-Competition Team Meeting
Following the competition, gather your team for a “team circle” in a designated area for a short meeting. The athletes can sit or kneel on one knee, and they may take off any extra equipment, if applicable. Before this meeting, decide as a coaching staff what to say and who will say it. Be sure that the coaching staff speaks with one voice following the competition.

If your athletes have performed well in a contest, compliment them and congratulate them. Tell them specifically what they did well, whether they won or lost. This will reinforce their desire to repeat their good performances. Don’t use this time to criticize individual athletes for poor performances in front of teammates. Help athletes improve their skills, but do so in the next practice, not immediately after the competition.

The post-competition team circle isn’t the time to go over tactical problems and adjustments. The athletes are either so happy after a win or so dejected after a loss that they won’t absorb much tactical information. Your first concern should be your athletes’ attitudes and mental well-being. You don’t want them to be too high after a win or too low after a loss. This is the time you can be most influential in keeping the outcome in perspective and keeping them on an even keel. Set goals based on the sport’s statistics such as rebounds, steals, turnovers, completed passes, field goals, and free throws (attempts and makes), fast breaks, etc. Following the game, note how many of those goals were achieved; those not achieved provides information on what we need to work on next.

Remember, too, that although the final outcome of the competition may be extremely important to you, the staff, and some of the parents, for athletes the biggest concern may be whether they will get pizza or not. Realize that the majority of your athletes are participating to have fun, and understand that their desire to go out together for something to eat rather than reliving the competition is not a reflection on their desire to perform well. Stay positive, allow the athletes to be themselves, and avoid making too much over the outcome of the competition.
Finally, gather your athletes, coaches and parents/providers, go to your vehicles and drive home. Ensure your athletes have transportation home; ensure full supervision of your athletes.

Coaching Unified Sports

Dedicated to promoting social inclusion through shared sports training and competition experiences, Unified Sports joins together people with intellectual disabilities (athletes) and without (partners) on the same team. It was inspired by a simple principle: training together and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding.

In Unified Sports, teams are made up of people of similar age and ability, which makes practices more fun and games more challenging and exciting for all. Having sport in common is just one more way that preconceptions and false ideas are swept away. When coaching a unified sport it is important to remember and emphasize that every player on your team is equally important to the success of the team. Partners should be coached as much as athletes to ensure team cohesion and success.

As in all sports, the need for most athletes to belong or affiliate with other team members is of critical importance. The process of making friends and developing certain roles within the group is as much a part of sport as training and competition. Coaches should be especially alert at the beginning of the season when teammates are getting to know each other and judgments about others are being developed.

A key component in the genuine integration of special populations in programs like Unified Sports is the attitude, knowledge and subsequent behavior of the coach. Genuine integration of athletes and partners relies on three key factors, all influenced by the coach:

(a) interaction between athletes,

(b) perception of special treatment given the athlete or partner by the coach,

(c) recognition and acceptance of individual impairments in preparing athletes to successfully train and compete with partners.

The challenge of Unified Sports is to help people without intellectual disabilities integrate into the previously exclusionary teams of Special Olympics. Coaches need to plan, implement and evaluate actions to assure meaningful participation and enhanced social development of all players. The type of activity, amount of accommodation necessary, and intensity of competition are considered in structuring the sport experience.
Activities should foster respect for the uniqueness of everyone’s abilities, motivation and contribution to the unified team. Developing sport skills is the foremost task of the coach since athletes who are not competent to meet the demands of the Unified Sports setting and related social roles, risk disapproval from teammates and others, along with blows to self-esteem. The risks of winning and losing in integrated programs are compounded for the athlete.

Group cohesion is the term to describe the tendency for members of a group to stick to together and remain united as they work toward collective goals and social purposes. Athletes and partners in cohesive teams will display more positive attitudes, increased confidence and maximize sport performance. Group cohesion can be improved by the following suggestions:

- Use small groups (3-6 people) for practice drills and other team tasks when possible.
- Set team goals that athletes and partners understand and success can be easily determined.
- Clarify each team member’s role on the team
- Encourage all players to communicate by calling each other by their name
- Create opportunities for general communication among players before, during, and after practice or competition.
- Take the time to recognize specific players for good performance and encourage teammates to do the same.
- Use cooperative drills that build respect for each player’s contribution to the sport.

Effective Unified teams benefit athletes and partners equally. The most effective learning occurs when all players are actively learning by doing. Instruction designed for small groups and pairs will maximize time on task and aid in providing critical feedback on performance. In designing small groups for a unified mixed or training team model, you can either place athletes/partners with similar ability in the same group, or design groups of mixed ability. In all cases there should be a representative number of athletes and partners.

The following recommendations are useful in making decisions about grouping players:

- When a skill, rule, or strategy is being taught that all your players need to know, use a single group for instruction, but then allow for small groups of similar ability to practice the skill at various learning stations.
- When the activity involves combination drills or team tactics, use multiple groups of mixed ability for practice. Some players will seem to play better with certain other players, but encourage all players to get to know how to perform their best in any group situation.
- Establish new groups or pairs for practicing different skills. Avoid similar player pairing for more than one or two activities a practice.

Have a prepared plan for how to group or pair athletes for each activity. Have player’s self-select partners once in a while to build a sense of control and competence, but be careful of cliques that may form or devaluing of less skilled athletes. Successful teams value each team member equally and will improve player self-esteem on and off the field. Here is what a few Unified players has to say about their experiences:
“This experience made me a better team leader and a good friend. It made me brave to be myself.”

~ Mackenzie Beauvais-Niki, Special Olympics Athlete

“The biggest personal impact for me was realizing how talented individuals with disabilities can be. By experiencing first-hand the hard work and effort these young adults put forth I have been inspired to work just as hard and to be who I am without fear of discrimination.”

~ Dylan Spencer, Special Olympics Partner

Behavior Characteristics Grid

The goal of the chart below is to a. provide coaches with information (not labels) and strategies regarding different functional and learning characteristics (not labels) of athletes and b. help Special Olympics coaches work with athletes more effectively. However, a coach may have certain expectations of an athlete that may not be realistic … not because the coach does not care, but because the coach does not understand or appreciate the differences that may exist. When an athlete exhibits what is generally perceived as inappropriate behavior(s), the inappropriate behavior(s) may not be defiance, acting out or silliness. These behaviors may simply be a reflection or part of the person and/or what is operating at the moment. When possible, talk with parents, providers, teachers, former coaches, etc. about an athlete’s characteristics and the successful strategies used to affect learning. Use the characteristics as a checklist. Ensure that one or more of the strategies opposite the respective characteristics are employed in each practice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Athlete Behavior Characteristics</th>
<th>Strategies to Improve Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning occurs at a slower rate</td>
<td>1) Provide structure &amp; train more frequently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Provide repetition and review. Circle back to previously mastered skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Break skills down into smaller parts. Don’t move on until a skill is mastered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4) Differentiate learning – teach at the level of the athlete; remove supports as skills are mastered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5) Assign a partner, volunteer or assistant coach to help. Provide additional repetitions without holding up the practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6) Present skills in a variety of ways. Explain, demonstrate, and practice. When explaining a skill/drill, it may be necessary to illustrate the skill.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete Behavior Characteristics</td>
<td>Strategies to Improve Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Short attention span             | 1) Train for short periods of time; provide numerous activities focusing on same task.  
2) Provide repetition & review (key to gaining new skill).  
3) Work one-on-one (gain full attention). Do not explain a drill/skill without gaining attention from athlete. This may be demonstrated by attaining eye contact or having the player repeat after you the directions stated for the drill. (30 seconds is the amount of time that people can retain information in short-term memory.)  
4) Use stations. Stations are a great way to circle back to previously learned skills. Depending on the number of volunteers, running 3 – 5 stations for 30 minutes of practice is appropriate. |
| Resistance to change; stubborn    | 1) Structure training with clear expectations, consistent routines (follow same format for each practice i.e.: warm-up lap, stretching, older drills for reinforcement of previously learned material, new drills, controlled play situations in which to practice new skills) and a cool down.  
2) Players should be made aware when a transition will happen. State the time to be spent on an activity and give a warning of its end 5 minutes prior; two minutes prior and then at the close of the activity.  
3) Identify motivating factors; build on successes. If there is a favorite drill, save it for the end of practice when all objectives have been met. |
| Behavior problems: acting out; mood swings | 1) Set clear rules, expectations and limits; specify location for individual to regain self-control. Consistent enforcement of limits is a MUST. Athletes will learn quickly when you mean something and when you do not.  
2) Consequences should be enforceable and short term.  
3) Reinforce acceptable behaviors. Praising positive behaviors may be enough of a motivator for the athlete. Rewards can also be given in the absence of undesirable behaviors, that is, 5 minutes without cursing earn a check; five checks gets a preferred object or something the athlete likes.  
4) Help the athlete find a replacement behavior that serves the same function. All behavior serves a function; whether it be to “get” something or “avoid” something. If the athlete attends school or lives in a group home, there may be a behavior plan in place. Speak with the caretakers of the athlete and find out what is in place.  
5) NOTE: Just because a behavior has not been noted in a long period of time, does not mean that it is gone. Be on the lookout for it to re-surface. The disability is with the athlete for life even if the behavior is not.  
6) A behavior (intervention) support plan is developed after collecting information about the function a particular behavior serves – to get something or avoid something. A similar but acceptable behavior is then taught. The student is rewarded for using the replacement behavior and the reinforcement schedule is reduced until the replacement behavior has eliminated the inappropriate behavior. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Athlete Behavior Characteristics</th>
<th>Strategies to Improve Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Verbal expression difficulties   | 1) Allow for additional time to express thoughts. Don’t finish the sentence or thought for the athlete.  
2) Use picture boards/other assistive devices. Simple sign language may also work. Speak with caretakers to gain information on how they communicate with the athlete.  
3) Ask him or her to demonstrate or show what he/she means. |
| Verbal interpretation difficulties | 1) Provide the appropriate level of instruction beginning with demonstration (can be spoken, drawn or demonstrated) followed by the appropriate level of prompting. Each athlete will require different supports at different times for different skills.  
2) Keep verbal instructions to a minimum.  
3) Use key words/cues, sign language or pictures to communicate. |
| Prone to seizures                | 1) Know signs and symptoms of different types of seizures.  
2) Control OR MODIFY atmosphere/triggers (heat, sun, sugar, loud noise, etc.) of seizures; respond appropriately. Have a volunteer/parent on side line watch the athlete specifically during the practice/game for any signs that may occur. If the activity cannot be modified, find something else for the athlete to do such as take stats, collect equipment, or hand out pennies. They are still part of the team.  
3) Prepare teammates to respond appropriately should a seizure occur. Have a plan in place and practice it!! |
| Poor muscle tone                | 1) Provide specific exercise and strengthening programs. Provide home exercises for motivated athletes. Discuss with parents, siblings the importance of a home practice. You can provide data sheets in which the athlete tracks his/her progress. Rewards can be given for goals met.  
2) Stretch within normal range of motion. Each athlete’s range of motion will be different on different days. Teach athletes to listen to their bodies, and if it hurts STOP!  
3) Uneven surfaces increase risk of injury. Worn footwear can also contribute to injury. |
| Lower pain threshold; sensitive to touch | 1) Establish eye contact when talking, when appropriate. Some athletes may become more upset about maintaining eye contact. Know your athletes.  
2) Use softer/adaptive equipment; minimize loud noises like whistles (or gradually introduce them)  
3) Forewarn if any touch is necessary; respect wishes. |
| Failure to form social bonds     | 1) Work in small groups.  
2) Have each athlete work in pairs (same 2 people for several weeks). Some athletes will prefer to work by themselves. Find a sport/position which will honor this preference. It may be that the athlete needs to change sports.  
3) Provide highly structured social situations when athlete is engaging in a preferred activity with a peer. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Athlete Behavior Characteristics</th>
<th>Strategies to Improve Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Easily over-stimulated</td>
<td>1) Remove or lessen distracting stimuli (dim lights; soften sounds; remove unnecessary objects).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Train in separate room or smaller group; gradually add people and other stimuli.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Train with athletes who tend to be nonverbal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4) Planned breaks and quiet time during practice, between activities if possible. This will enable the athlete to “regroup” before moving on to another activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty with balance or stability</td>
<td>1) Provide physical support, as needed, via partner or other assistive device.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Broaden base of support such as sitting down or leaning against wall; minimize uneven surfaces. Certain positions on a team lend themselves to being more conducive to athlete success than others. Find the position that fits your athlete’s abilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Allow for extra time to complete a task. Modify the task to fit the athlete’s ability level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4) Speak with physical therapist if possible, brainstorm with other coaches for ideas. Caregivers may also be able to provide information/assistance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compulsive eating</td>
<td>1) Remove food from practice/competition sites.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Do not use food as reward (especially for individuals with Prader Willi).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Provide structure and routine for eating (time and place). If this has been a longstanding issue for your athletes, speaking with caregivers will give suggestions to take what they have used in the past that has proven to be successful and you can modify to fit your coaching situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor coordination</td>
<td>1) Break skills down into sequential tasks; substitute easier movement (walking instead of running).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Progress from athlete’s current level of performance. Charting improvement is a great motivator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Allow additional time with one-on-one support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4) Provide a home practice plan. This will help build muscle memory as well as stamina and coordination. Using time at home for reinforcement will allow for more time at practice for exposure to new drills/skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical limitations or impairments</td>
<td>1) Utilize those skills or parts of skills athlete can perform.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) For those skills or parts of skills athlete is unable to perform, allow athlete to substitute other skills, have partner execute those skills or use assistive device.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Focus on activities that develop mobility and stability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4) Speak with outside therapists, caregivers for suggestions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete Behavior Characteristics</td>
<td>Strategies to Improve Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual impairments</td>
<td>1) Use verbal cues, physical prompt and physical assistance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Utilize sound or physical devices such as beep balls, guide rope along lane line, tether when running with partner, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Provide precise and action-specific and feedback.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4) Control any environmental factors which you can i.e. lighting; colors of balls, cones, pennies etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5) Wireless transmitter may be appropriate and available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing impairments</td>
<td>1) Establish eye contact when talking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Use signs, pictures or sign language; keep cochlear implants dry. You can even develop sport specific signs. (Think third base coach in baseball)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Demonstrate what is desired.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4) Hand signals to look at the coach for directions. You may need to have a parent/coach on other side of field to relay messages if needed or to direct athlete to look at the coach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autism spectrum disorders</td>
<td>1) Minimize verbal; emphasize visual (Board Maker) because of difficulty in processing sensory stimuli (over arousal); provide only one item per picture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Reduce sensory overload like whistles (some athletes are hypersensitive to noise).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Individualize schedule with known start &amp; known finish (predictability); use clear, consistent cues &amp; prompts; cue transition from one activity to next.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4) Autism is a “spectrum” disorder not all athletes with autism will have the same needs. Some will be less severe than others. Individuals with Asperger’s can be very bright but have social deficits that may impede them from developing social bonds. Meet with caregivers for specifics concerning your athlete.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-stimulatory behaviors</td>
<td>1) Become aware and monitor. Self-stimulatory behaviors are any behaviors that are serving a sensory need for the athlete. Many times, these behaviors are sexual in nature. The athlete will need to be taught the “time and place” where these behaviors are acceptable (a practice or a game is NOT one of them). Working with the caregiver will help develop a protocol for the athlete to get the need met.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Control situation. Engage athlete in activities that provide an alternative to self-stimulatory behavior. If an athlete flaps his hands/arms when running, practice running with “quiet hands”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) May need to block such behaviors if inappropriate or distracting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-injurious behaviors</td>
<td>1) Become aware of cuts or banging head against table or wall. Work with medical person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Control or block behavior. Redirect to an alternate behavior that meets the same need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Provide behavior support plan to manage. (See managing behaviors section)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete Behavior Characteristics</td>
<td>Strategies to Improve Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Obsessive-compulsive behaviors  | 1) Become aware and monitor. Compulsive behaviors are any behaviors that are ritualized to a point that the athlete is unable to perform other functions, i.e. picking fingers until bleeding, constant eating, repetitive statements.  
2) Control situation or block behavior.  
3) Provide a behavior support plan to manage. (See managing behaviors/mood swings section) |
| Hyperactivity                    | 1) Use three or more sensory channels: touch; feeling where you are in movement; see; hear.  
2) Set clear rules, consistent routines and smooth transitions with signals for changing activities with motivating reinforcement.  
3) Keep directions simple (2 – 3 steps at the most); minimize information.  
4) Have athlete repeat back directions or show what has been asked of them to demonstrate an understanding of what has been said.  
5) Use stations to shift activities in a short period of time. |
| Lethargy (due to disability or medication) | 1) Provide frequent rest intervals.  
2) Expose to sports that provide natural rest periods such as bocce, bowling, golf, etc.  
3) Slowly progress to longer periods of activity.  
4) Modify activities for athlete success.  
5) Be aware of side effects of medications. |
| Lack of motivation to push self  | 1) Be aware that the greater the intellectual disability, the less motivated to continue activity once individual feels uncomfortable.  
2) Add positive consequence/reward to continue activity such as peddling on stationary bike to drive power to TV or music player; transition to sport).  
3) Reward even small improvements in performance. Charting progress is a great visual motivator.  
4) Using contingent statements can be effective. Once we finish ________(non-preferred activity) we can do __________(preferred activity). |
As we have seen, intellectual disabilities can manifest in different ways in different athletes, even those with the same diagnoses. It is imperative to treat each athlete as an individual with different wants/needs and with different ways of communicating these wants and needs with you, the coach. Assumptions based upon disability type can be detrimental to the athlete, coach and team. Conversations with the athlete’s current team (parents, teachers, employers, etc.) can yield important information about the athlete. Use these people as a resource when developing your practice and game plans. Being flexible is also a bonus. The athletes, like all of us, can have different behaviors on different days; be ready for anything!

Closing Notes

After reading this guide, I sincerely hope Special Olympics have given you the knowledge to help us, the athletes, be successful both on and off the playing field.

We want our coaches:

- To be role models by showing good sportsmanship.
- To not be afraid to encourage family members to help and volunteer in working with us.
- To not be afraid to challenge us and help make us better at our chosen sport.
- To value the opinion of each athlete.
- Most importantly we want our coaches to make it fun!

And lastly, we want coaches to always demonstrate the spirit of our Special Olympics oath:

“Let me win, but if I cannot win, let me be brave in attempt”.

By Matt Millett, Special Olympics athlete and member of the 2013 Special Olympics International Coaching Fellowship
References Cited


