



Inclusion and integration through sport



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What is Special Olympics?

Special Olympics Ireland is a sports organisation providing training and competition for people with an intellectual disability. Through sport, athletes develop both physically, socially and emotionally. They learn new skills, make new friends and have the opportunity to reach their potential. Special Olympics Ireland was historically based in Special Schools and Intellectual Disability Services across the island. In later years, Special Olympics Ireland began to establish community based sports clubs and these now play a leading role in providing a variety of sports opportunities to people with an intellectual disability.

In response to the demand for greater inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in the community, Special Olympics International developed a new competitive sports programme. This programme, known as the Unified Sports programme, provides opportunities for some players and athletes with and without intellectual disabilities and of similar abilities, to train and compete alongside one another, as equals. The programme has recently been revised and is now offering three models of activity which will enable Special Olympics clubs to offer more opportunities for inclusion and integration.

Some Special Olympics Clubs have expanded their programme and now offer inclusive or integrated opportunities in order to increase awareness, recruit new volunteers and on some occasions raise funds for their clubs. To assist Special Olympics clubs who are seeking additional opportunities for their athletes to integrate with the wider community through sport, this guide has been developed, which explains some ways in which clubs can do this.

The three models offered by Unified Sports® are as follows:

- Unified Sports Recreation*
- Unified Sports Player Development*
- Unified Sports Competitive

** Unified Sports Player Development and Unified Sports Recreation allow for modifications to the Special Olympics Official Sports Rules. **They are not official events**; rather, they provide opportunities for Special Olympics clubs to increase awareness, integration and inclusion in the local community.*

Unified Sports Recreation

As the name would suggest, Unified Sports Recreation offers a less structured and more informal approach to inclusive and integrated sports activities. The main objectives of activities within this programme are to promote social inclusion while improving sports specific skills and knowledge. They are a great opportunity for increasing the profile of your club within your local community and may even include a fundraising element. Unified Sports Recreation activities are not necessarily required to meet the age and ability matching requirements of traditional Unified Sports.

How can your club offer Unified Sports Recreation?

Here are some activities you can offer under the banner of Unified Sports Recreation, some of which are already being offered by Special Olympics clubs in Ireland:

- Friendly sports events involving athletes from Special Olympics Clubs and a local school competing both alongside and against one another.
- Inclusive multi sports fun days including Special Olympics athletes and local sports clubs or community members competing alongside one another.
- Awareness and Fundraising corporate activities with staff and athletes competing together.

Unified Sports Player Development

The Unified Sport Player Development model is more flexible than the traditional model, but more structured than the recreational model. It allows for a greater range of ability between athletes and partners. In permitting the inclusion of partners with a higher ability level, the player development model provides an opportunity for partners of higher ability level to assist and guide their team mates in developing sport specific skills, learning sports rules and etiquette and gaining tactical awareness. Competition is offered locally only and not at National or International level. At present, Level 2 golf, which fits these criteria, is an exception to this rule and will remain as an official event in competition. Special Olympics International intends to review this at a future date.

How can your club offer Unified Sports Player Development?

You can incorporate Unified Sports Player Development elements into your club's activities in a lot of fun ways. The following are some examples of how you can offer Unified Sports Player Development in your club.

- Team Sports – stronger or more experienced players may help with the development of tactical understanding and awareness in a team.
- Doubles or Team Events – introducing a partner of a higher ability level can help athletes learn about tactics, positioning, rules and etiquette in a competitive environment. (e.g. in badminton, the partner may help teach the athlete about positioning and communication on court. In an athletics relay team of 2 athletes and 2 partners, the partners may help teach the technical element of a baton exchange whilst giving the athletes the experience of competing).

Unified Sports Competitive

Unified Sports is a competitive sports model, involving teams which combine approximately equal number of athletes (with an intellectual disability) and partners (without an intellectual disability). Athletes and partners must be of similar age and ability and should have previously attained the necessary sports specific skills and tactics to compete without the modification of the current Special Olympics Sports Rules, which will govern all competitions. *Please note: This traditional Unified Sports model, is not currently offered in Special Olympics Ireland.*

For further information, contact your Special Olympics Ireland Regional Office or visit our website at **www.specialolympics.ie**