



Special Olympics & Paralympics

What's the Difference?

Special Olympics and Paralympics are two separate entities recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). They both focus on sport for athletes with a disability and are run by international non-profit organizations. Apart from that, Special Olympics and the Paralympics differ in three main areas: 1) the disability categories of the athletes involved, 2) the criteria and philosophy under which athletes participate, and 3) the structure of their respective organizations.

THE ATHLETES

Special Olympics welcomes children and adults with intellectual disabilities of all skill levels for training and competition in 32 Olympic-type sports. Competitions involve athletes 8 and older; the Young Athletes program is for ages 2-7. To be eligible to participate in Special Olympics, athletes must have an intellectual disability, a cognitive delay, or a development disability, that is, functional limitations in both general learning and adaptive skills. (In addition to intellectual disability, some Special Olympics athletes also have a physical disability.) **Paralympics** welcomes athletes from 10 categories of impairment: impaired muscle power; impaired range of movement; limb deficiency; leg length difference; short stature; hypertonia; ataxia (affecting muscle coordination); athetosis (such as cerebral palsy); vision impairment; and intellectual disability. To participate in the Paralympics, athletes must meet certain qualifying standards.

SPORTING PHILOSOPHY

Special Olympics believes deeply in the power of sports to help empower all adults and children with intellectual disabilities fulfill their potential. It does not exclude any athlete based upon qualifying scores, but rather divisions athletes for fair competition against others of like age, gender and ability. For Special Olympics athletes, excellence is a personal achievement, a reflection of reaching one's personal best -- a goal to which everyone can aspire. To participate in the **Paralympics**, athletes must meet certain sports-specific standards as determined by the International Paralympic Committee. The IPC's vision is "to enable Paralympic athletes to achieve sporting excellence and inspire and excite the world."

STRUCTURE

Special Olympics is a global organization that changes lives through the power of sport every day by encouraging and empowering people with intellectual disabilities, promoting acceptance for all, and fostering communities of understanding and respect worldwide. There is an international Board of Directors, based in Washington, D.C. and 221 individual Programs in 170 countries. The **Paralympics** is run by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), which is headquartered in Bonn, Germany. The IPC's operational structure includes a General Assembly, a Governing Board and various Standing Committees and Councils. There are 176 member nations, represented through their National Paralympic Committees.