



# Coaching the Special Olympics Athlete

Unleashing the Potential  
in Every Athlete

# Welcome!

Your journey to  
inspire greatness  
in every athlete  
starts here!



# Course Overview

**Getting to Know Your Athletes**

**Safety, Rules, and Logistics**

**Practice Time**

**Strategies for Coaching Excellence**





# Section 1

# Getting to Know Your Athletes



# An Athlete is an Athlete

Successful coaches in any setting - from community and school youth leagues to the pros - understand each athlete is unique and will learn and be motivated in their own way.

It's no different for Special Olympics athletes. Getting to know each of your athletes allows you to coach in a way that works best for each person.



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# Person-Centered

- Each athlete is unique. Not everyone will respond to your coaching techniques in the same way.
- It is helpful to avoid making assumptions about an individual based on their diagnosis.
- Focus on each person's strengths and abilities, rather than being driven by a diagnosis.
- It is not uncommon for an athlete's diagnosis to be unknown.



# Alike *and* Uniquely Different

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- Though each athlete is unique, you will find some commonalities among your athletes.
- Coming up are some examples and coaching tips to help you and your athletes have a great experience!



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# Learning

Learning may take place at differing rates.

Athletes may have difficulty understanding what you're asking them to do and/or executing what you're asking them to do.



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# Learning

## COACHING TIPS:

- Break skills down into small components, then gradually progress by combining these components.
- Begin with simplified movements or concepts. Based on each athlete's progression, increase the speed or complexity.
- Patience is important. Despite giving their best effort, athletes may not understand, learn and achieve right away.
- Do not lower your expectations. When an athlete doesn't achieve quickly, it does not mean they are incapable.



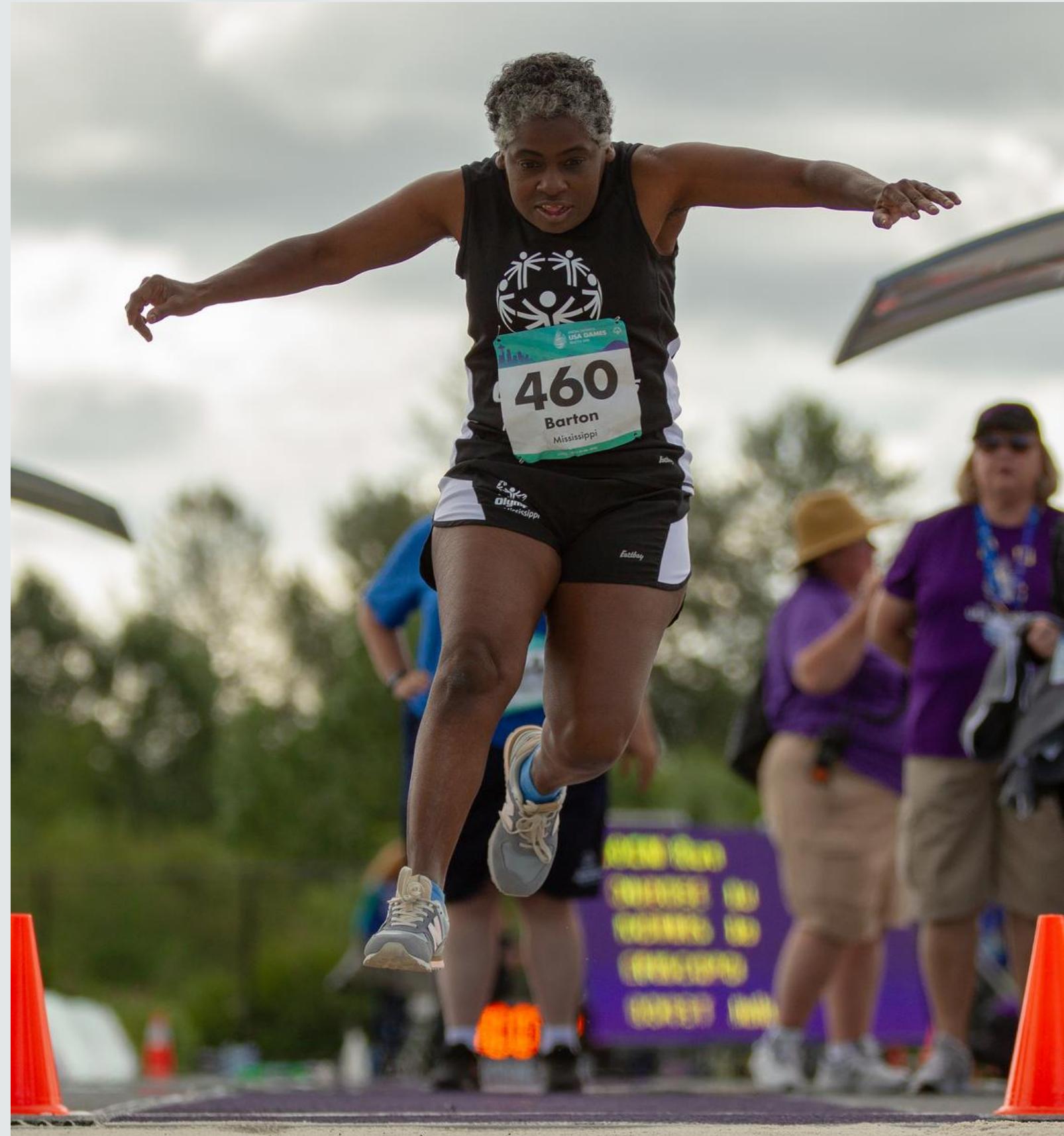
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# Memory

You are building sports skills through a progression each time you meet your athletes. Some athletes will need reminders about what was covered at a previous practice.

## COACHING TIPS:

- Use consistent language and terminology.
- Use simple verbal cues to help athletes remember sequences of movements.
- Give instructions in 1 or 2 parts at a time. Multiple part instructions can be overwhelming.



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# Memory

## MORE COACHING TIPS:

- Repetition is important. Allow athletes to experience an activity over and over to help develop skills.
- Repetition doesn't mean boring or always the same.
- Keep practice sessions interesting by teaching the same skill in multiple ways, allowing for repetition with variety all at the same time.



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# Language/Communication

Some athletes are more verbal than others and some have speech patterns that can be difficult to understand.



## COACHING TIPS:

- Be patient. Understand you may have to ask someone to repeat what they expressed/said.
- Allow the athlete time to express themselves. Don't finish their sentences for them.



# Coach so everyone will understand

Never assume someone cannot understand; always assume they may need more time or a different approach.

## Coaching Tips:

- Be clear and concise
- Avoid complex concepts and lengthy instructions
- Slow down- pace instructions and give extra time to reply
- Keep it simple: Vocabulary: Use simple words
- Use multiple communication methods. repeat directions several times in different way If applicable, many coaches will learn a few words, phrases, or instructions in sign language.
- Be sure the athlete is comfortable – ask what works best. No need to go it alone, ask family or caregivers about communication strategies that work.

# Non-Verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication can be powerful! Be mindful of what your facial expressions and gestures express. Remain positive and encouraging.

Some athletes use a communication device or sign language. You are not expected to learn sign language but learning a few common signs can be helpful. Your athlete's care provider can share a few important ones with you, or you can learn a few with the help of YouTube.



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With the help of YouTube, let's learn a few common signs that may be helpful to your athletes that sign.



How to Sign:	YouTube Link:
Greetings	<a href="#">Greetings in ASL   ASL - American Sign Language (youtube.com)</a>
Yes, No, Please, Thank-You, You're Welcome	<a href="#">signing yes, no, please, thank you, you're welcome withAmericanSignLanguage(ASL)(youtube.com)</a>
Bathroom	<a href="#">Learn How to Sign Bathroom in ASL   LearnHowToSign (youtube.com)</a>
Drink	<a href="#">Learn How to Sign Drink in ASL   LearnHowToSign (youtube.com)</a>
Water	<a href="#">ASL - WATER (youtube.com)</a>
Yes, I Understand	<a href="#">Learn How to Sign Yes, I Understand in ASL   LearnHowToSign.org (youtube.com)</a>
Again	<a href="#">Learn How to Sign Please Sign Again in ASL   LearnHowToSign.org (youtube.com)</a>
Help	<a href="#">Sign HELP - Sign Language ASL #shorts (youtube.com)</a>



# Sensory Considerations

Some athletes experience sensory sensitivities. Loud noises, bright lights or crowds can be overwhelming and can cause discomfort or distress.

## COACHING TIPS:

- Work with your athletes and their caregivers, to understand if they have specific sensitivities. Understanding what might be a trigger allows you to take steps to reduce or eliminate triggers.
- Work with athletes to support them in an environment where they may experience these sensitivities and provide solutions to avoid discomfort.

# Concentration

## COACHING NOTE:

Some athletes concentrate better *with* sensory stimulation. The following accommodations can support these athletes:



Fidget Objects (stress ball, spinner, etc.) to channel excess energy and maintain focus.

Moderate Challenge: Assign tasks that are neither too easy nor too difficult. Find the right balance to keep athletes engaged and concentrating.

Pairing: Assign a peer partner, another athlete or assistant coach who performs the same tasks/activities to provide support.

Remember everyone's needs are unique, so it's essential to collaborate with athletes and care providers to best support your athletes' needs for greatest concentration.



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# Physical Challenges

In addition to ID, some of your athletes may have a physical disability and/or mobility challenges.

## COACHING TIPS:

- If an athlete uses a wheelchair or assistive walking device, become familiar with rules for its use in the sport or events in which your athlete is competing.
- Adaptations are possible for those with visual or hearing impairments. Your State or Program office can provide helpful information about training adaptations and helping you know what is allowed in competition.



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# Physical Challenges

## COACHING NOTES:

- You are not expected to be an expert at making adaptations for physical challenges.
- To learn how best to help an athlete with mobility challenges, ASK. They and their care providers will be the best resource for helping you learn how to support their needs.



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# Seizures

- It's not uncommon for some athletes to experience seizures during their time with you. If an athlete has a history of seizures, their medical history will alert you.
- Get information from parents/care providers about specific triggers or warning signs and what to expect if an athlete has a seizure while they are with you.

## COACHING TIP:

- If an athlete experiences a seizure during your time together, your main responsibility is to keep the athlete safe and calm, and ensure the rest of the team remains calm.
- More specific First Aid information can be found here: [Seizure First Aid | Epilepsy | CDC](#)



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# Meeting Individual Needs

- Focusing on individual behaviors helps you meet the athlete's needs, allowing them to achieve their greatest potential.
- Speak with family members or care providers to find out what helps motivate and encourage each athlete, and how they prefer to communicate and receive instruction.
- The document: *Athlete Behaviors and Strategies* is a helpful resource for understanding various coaching techniques related to behavior characteristics. It is available from your State or Program office.





## Section 2

# Safety, Rules and Logistics

# Athlete Medical Information

- Each Special Olympics athlete will complete some type of registration form and/or medical form which provides you medical information and consent for emergency care if necessary.
- As a coach, it is important you become familiar with their medical information and to respect its highly confidential nature.



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# Medication

You are responsible for becoming familiar with the medical information of each of your athletes.

This includes information on what medications they need and when they need it (since you will be serving as a chaperone at times).



## COACHING TIPS:

- Be aware medications can have side effects that make a difference in athlete performance and/or behavior. For example, medication might make someone sleepy or lacking in energy. Parents/care providers can be a helpful resource for information in this regard.
- Medical information is CONFIDENTIAL. Your Program will help you understand the strict guidelines regarding who can have access to this information.

# Risk Management

- Pay attention to safety first.
- Have a first aid/emergency plan in place.  
Your State Program can assist.
- Complete all necessary training.
- Ensure equipment and facilities  
are suitable and appropriate.
- Ensure adequate supervision is provided.  
(SONA requires 1:4 ratio of coach to athlete in  
most cases.)
- Ensure athletes have necessary paperwork  
in place before practicing.



<https://www.specialolympicsva.org/crisis-communication-and-risk-management-webinar>

# Transportation

Some athletes may walk, bike or drive to practices on their own, while others rely on care providers for transportation.

Sometimes athletes won't have needed support to get them to practice.

## COACHING TIPS:

- Try to be understanding of early or late arrivals.
- Share with care providers the importance of being on time and how the entire team is impacted when an athlete is late or absent.
- SO does not allow transportation in 15 passenger vans



# Managing School and Work Commitments

School or work commitments may interfere with athlete availability for your practice times/days.

## COACHING TIPS:

- Know that your planned practice days/times likely won't meet the availability needs of everyone.
- Communicate attendance expectations in advance with athletes and care providers so all are clear.
- Share info on practice and competition dates well in advance, allowing athletes to get time off from school or work if necessary. Your team counts on all teammates to attend competition.



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# Know and Enforce the Rules



- **KNOW the rules of the sport:** have a comprehensive understanding of the rules governing the sports you are coaching. This helps you ensure safety and compliance.
- **TEACH the rules of the sport:** educate your athletes about the rules of their sport. You can break down complex rules into understandable lessons to ensure they understand
- **Ensure athletes FOLLOW the rules:** set clear expectations that all athletes follow the rules during practices and competitions. This is crucial for fair play and sportsmanship.
- **Create a culture of RESPECT for the rules:** help athletes develop discipline, responsibility, and integrity, contributing to their overall growth on and off the field.

# Help Guide Sport or Event Selection

Athletes may need guidance as they decide what sports and events are appropriate. The coach will take on the responsibility of helping athletes make appropriate choices based on several factors:

## COACHING TIPS:

- Consider safety – is athlete physically prepared for the demands of the sport/event? This may change as an athlete ages.
- Consider interest – does the athlete enjoy it?
- Training – is the athlete well-trained and prepared to compete in the sport/event?

## COACHING NOTE:

While competition can be a wonderful experience, it can also be distressing if an athlete is unprepared. It's anxiety producing and unfair.



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# Competition and Advancement

- Opportunities for advancement should not be the primary factor when deciding what sports and events are best for athletes.
- Consider all factors when entering an athlete into an event, are they physically, developmentally and emotionally ready and most of all do they like it, will they have fun.
- Your role is to responsibly help athletes choose sports or events that are appropriate, and then help them to be physically and mentally ready to compete.



# Chaperoning

Athletes can be vulnerable in many ways. They may not be able to recognize someone who may be falsely kind in order to take advantage of them. Actions you can take support them include:

- Complete the Protective Behaviors (Safe Sport) course to ensure a safe environment for athletes.
- While in your care, be sure to provide proper chaperoning.
- If you see or hear something that concerns you, take proper steps.
- Maintain proper chaperoning ratios and vigilant observation to protect athletes from potential risks.



A photograph of a man and a young girl running together. The man is on the left, wearing a white t-shirt with 'FLORIDA' and the number '1'. The young girl is on the right, wearing a white t-shirt with 'FLORIDA' and the number '2'. They are both smiling and appear to be in motion. The background is blurred, suggesting movement.

# Administrative Duties

Things will run smoothly when you stay on top of the administrative tasks. Remember, you can get help from others to make sure the following occurs:

- Communicate regularly with athletes and care providers.
- Ensure athletes and care providers get clear info regarding deadlines, paperwork requirements, competition dates, transportation details, etc.
- Meet competition entry requirement deadlines.
- Ensure entry scores are accurate.
- Keep accurate attendance records.
- Keep records of practice and competition performance.
- Prepare and record practice session plans and reflections on sessions.



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## Section 3 Practice Time

# Planning for your Practices

Planning practice in advance is critical. “Winging it” will cause frustration for you and your athletes and will limit progress.

Planning will:

- Make the most of your limited time with athletes
- Engage Asst. Coaches, Sport Assistants and the team in a meaningful way
- Allow athletes to know what to expect
- Help you track learning progression
- Save planning time in the future



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# Keep Practices Active!

- **Think: 100% involvement, 100% of the time.** Use activity stations that allow you and your Assistant Coaches to teach skills in a variety of ways.
- **Keep athletes engaged** even when they need a quick rest by having an athlete perform an activity while the others support it. Example: athlete shoots at the basket, another rebounds the ball (allowing them to rest while remaining engaged).
- **PLAN – PLAN – PLAN!** Active practices take more planning, but active athletes are more engaged and will experience greater health benefits and improved sport development.



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# Fitness

These minimum “Fit” standards should be included in every sports practice

- 5-minute warm-up with dynamic stretches
- 5-minute cool-down with static stretches
- Conditioning integrated into practice
- Encouragement to be active and healthy outside of practice
- Focus on active practice
- Water breaks every 15-20 minutes
- Healthy foods encouraged at team functions



# Learning Styles

Athletes will learn in different ways at different times.

## COACHING TIPS:

- Demonstrating a task is often quite effective. Ensure your team experiences success performing the task before you add on the next step.
- Physical Assistance may be helpful in some cases. If needed, help them feel the movement by physically guiding them through the steps. Be sure to ask permission from the athlete before providing physical assistance.
- Visual Assistance may help some athletes in the form of videos or diagrams.



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# Consider Age and Skill Level

Keep the age and current skill level of your athletes in mind when choosing practice activities, allowing everyone to improve and experience success.



## COACHING TIPS:

- For athletes new to the sport, keep activities short and at a basic level.
- For experienced athletes, avoid simplistic activities so athletes aren't bored.
- Use age-appropriate language (Never call adult athletes "Kids").
- Provide diverse activities within the same practice for athletes of differing levels. Athletes can all work on the same skill, but use different activities based on ability level. (This becomes easier once you get to know your athletes.)

# Use Small Steps

Complex skills can be overwhelming. Breaking skills down into small, manageable steps – or tasks – helps facilitate learning.

Help athletes focus on the key points and movements, allowing them to develop confidence and competence.

## COACHING TIP:

- To break skills into tasks, start small.
- Add the next tasks bit by bit until the skill is achieved.

*Example:* teach the skill of a lay-up by breaking it into necessary tasks – dribbling, add in forward movement, add arm motion, etc.





# Making Decisions

It's common for athletes to have others making decisions on their behalf. They may not get to decide what they eat, when/where they go places, etc. You can help promote independence by allowing them to make decisions at practice.

## COACHING TIPS:

- **Provide opportunities for athletes to make choices at practices.**
- **It may take time for athletes to make decisions if they're not used to having their voice heard. Encourage them and support their choices. Most of all, stick with it!**



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# Feedback & Encouragement

## COACHING TIPS:

- Give constructive feedback and encouragement in a way that is sincere, not patronizing.
- Focus on what athletes are doing well.
- Avoid constant feedback or constant instruction. Too much instruction at one time can be confusing and discouraging.
- Focus on one component, give instruction, allow athletes to practice before giving more instruction. One thing at a time.
- Observe how athletes respond to feedback and adjust accordingly. Some athletes like a lot of feedback, others prefer a limited amount.

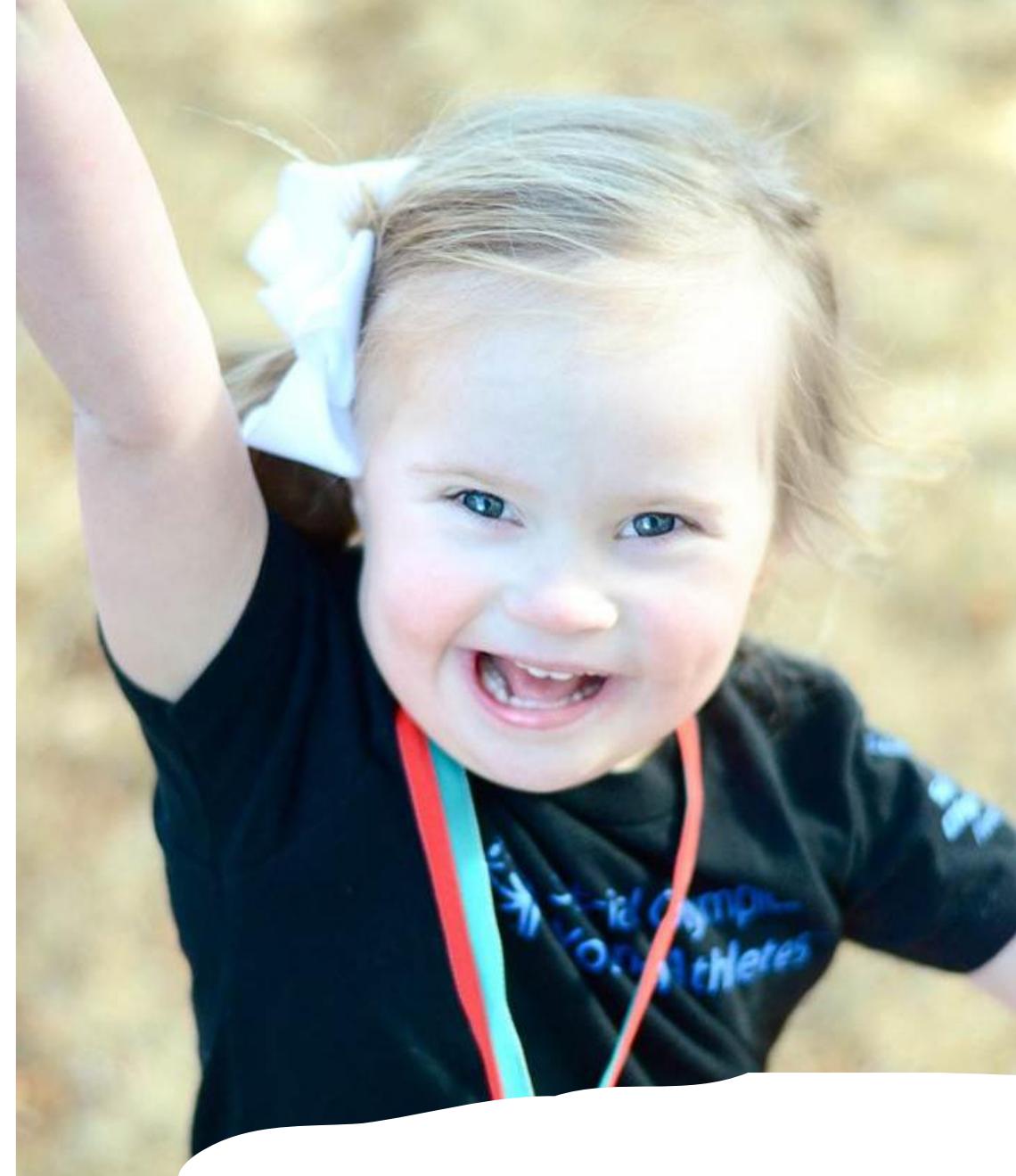


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## Foster a Supportive and Inclusive Team Culture

- Respect and encourage independence and self-sufficiency of athletes.
- Demonstrate and expect good sportsmanship
- Advocate for inclusion of athletes in sports and other community activities
- Ensure every team member has a meaningful role
- Model respect for all



## Section 4

# Strategies for Coaching Excellence



# Meaningful Involvement

- The principle of meaningful involvement aims to maximize participation and ensure that all players can contribute to their team's success.
- The principle is based on the idea that everyone has unique skills and qualities that can be valuable to the team.
- Whether you are coaching a traditional team of athletes who all have ID or a Unified Team, the principle of meaningful involvement applies in all settings and includes athletes with and Unified partners.
- If you are committed to ensuring meaningful involvement for each and every one of your athletes, you will be inspired and empowered to practice the inclusive coaching strategies covered here so that all athletes can learn, grow and excel to their own potential under your guidance and coaching.

# Respect and Inclusion

You can promote respect and encourage independence at each practice.

## COACHING TIPS:

- Involve the team in decision-making when possible, like choosing drills and setting goals.
- Encourage the team to lead various drills or games when possible.
- Demonstrate and expect good sportsmanship.
- Advocate for inclusion of athletes in sports and other community activities.
- Ensure every team member has a meaningful role.
- Know and adhere to your Coach Code of Conduct



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# Social/Emotional Support

## COACHING TIPS:

- Promote a sense of belonging and emotional support among ALL athletes.
- Encourage friendships and provide opportunities for social interaction among teammates.
- Remember your role is not to be a counselor or parent.
- Emphasize fun and enjoyment. However, fun does not mean practice can't be challenging!



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# Progress Over Perfection

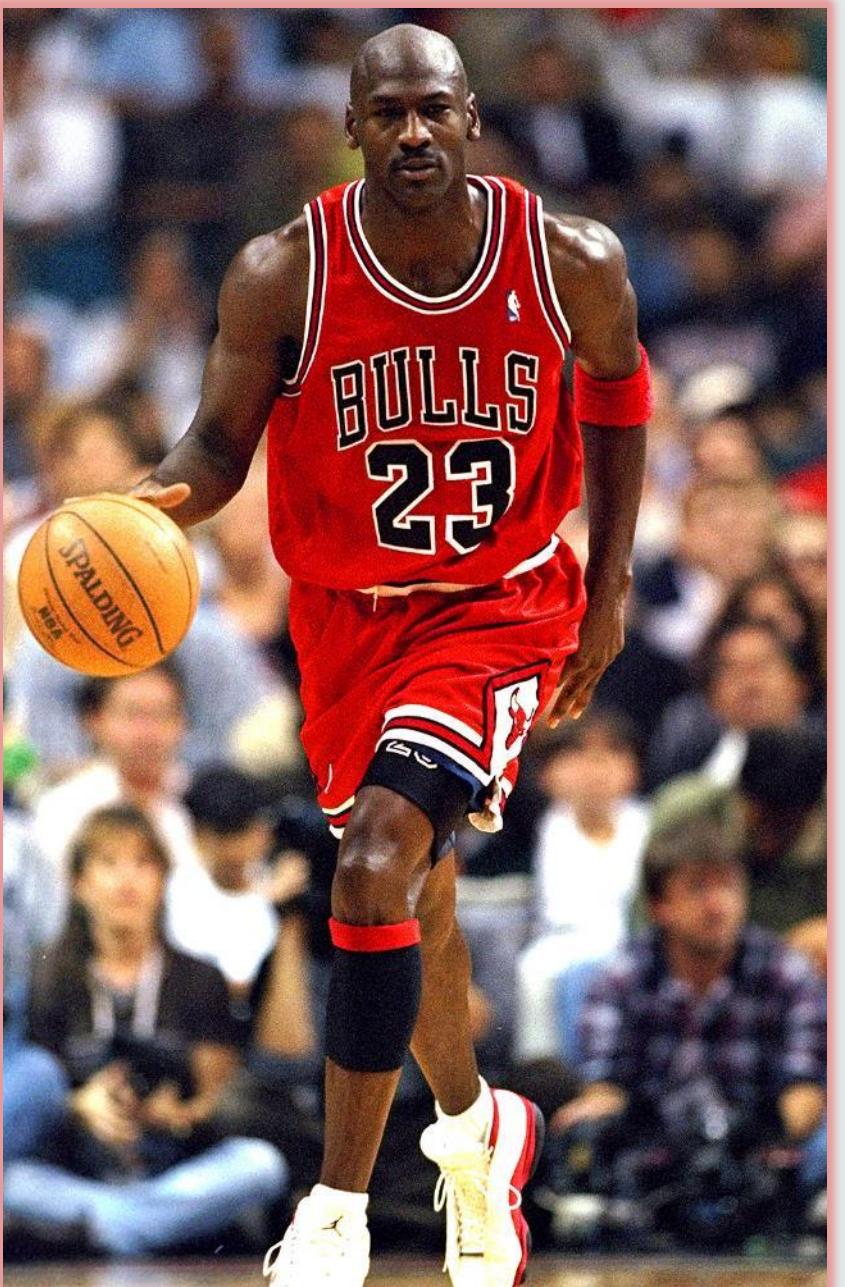


## COACHING TIPS:

- Learning won't happen immediately. Practice patience.
- Even if progress is slow or limited, it's important not to lower expectations.
- Celebrate success no matter how small.
- Positive reinforcement has proven to be much more effective than negative reinforcement.

# Progress over Perfection

- Embrace failure as an indicator of effort and a pathway to success.
- Create an environment where athletes feel safe trying something new or challenging, knowing that not reaching the goal, is not a problem.
- Celebrate effort and willingness to take on challenges.



Even Michael Jordan failed.

*"I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games.*

*Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed.*

*I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."*



# Positive Role Model

Your athletes will learn from behaviors you model.

## COACHING TIPS

- Demonstrate and expect sportsmanship.
- Encourage and support healthy lifestyles by including fitness activities within practices.
- Encourage and demonstrate the value of proper nutrition.
- Demonstrate and encourage work ethic.
- Empower and support emerging leaders.



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## It's more than a Game!

In your role of Coach, you have an incredible opportunity to make a positive impact on all members of your team! Implementing the components contained in this course, allows you to:

- Promote inclusion
- Build confidence and self-esteem
- Teach sportsmanship, kindness and humanity
- Create a positive, supportive environment where everyone can thrive
- **CHANGE LIVES**