



## Comparison between Unified Sports Competitive and Player Development Models

### Competitive and Player Development Unified Sports Teams

Special Olympics, Inc. published new guidelines for Unified Sports®, defining and differentiating between competitive and player development level teams. Competitive Unified Sports® teams are higher-ability teams comprised of athletes and partners of approximately equal ability levels. All players play to their highest ability level at all times. Player development teams are low to medium ability level teams that generally have partners who are higher skilled than the athletes. The partners serve as player mentors during competition and modify their play to accommodate the ability levels of the athletes. Below is further clarification of the two models:

#### **Understanding Player Development Teams:**

- 1) Teammates are not required to be of similar ability.
- 2) Teammates of higher ability may serve as mentors to players of lower abilities.
- 3) Rules modifications define players' roles.
- 4) Rules modifications can be used to promote meaningful involvement and prevent player dominance.
- 5) Teams cannot advancement beyond the state level.
- 6) Teams receive Unified Sports® ribbons or medals rather than place ribbons or medals.

Awarding a Unified Sports® Champion ribbon/medal (same award for all in the division) removes the incentive for partners to change the outcome of games by elevating their playing level at critical moments. Even though players will still understand the final score of the game, partners will be less compelled to assist their team in 'winning the gold.' Using Special Olympics Unified Sports® medals for state competitions and ribbons for area/region competitions encourages players to adjust their play to promote meaningful involvement of players on all teams.

#### **Similar Age Requirements:**

All teams competing in Local, Regional and/or State Level Competition must meet the following age criteria:

1. If any member of a team is over the age of 22 all other team member **must** be age 14 or older to participate.  
**Teams with players age 22 and over may NOT have a player younger than age 14.**
2. If any member of a team is between the ages of 8-13, the variance between the youngest and oldest member of the team **must** be no more than 5 years. (If the youngest is 10yrs. old, the oldest player cannot exceed 15yrs. old)

**Similar Age Requirements for advancement for USA or World Games:** In addition, any teams wishing to qualify for advancement to USA or World Games **must** meet the criteria for eligibility according to [Special Olympics Article 1](#).  
*The Similar Age requirements are more stringent at this level.*

**Unified Coaches training—** All Unified Coaches should complete the [Coaching Unified Sports course](#). Training Unified Coaches promotes consistency among teams and encourages all teams to use the same meaningful involvement standards. *The course is also appropriate for Unified Partners.* This free one-hour long course details the basics of Special Olympics Unified Sports and offers guidance on implementing a successful Unified Sports program. Coaches and partners are encouraged to participate in Unified Sports training including discussions about competition philosophy, meaningful involvement, player dominance, differentiating between competitive and player development teams, and rule modifications for player development teams. Trainings can be online, in person—locally, regionally, or statewide.



Unified Sports Competitive	Unified Sports Player Development
Inclusive sports program	Inclusive sports program
Approximately equal number of athletes and partners train and compete	Approximately equal number of athletes and partners train and compete
<b>Similar ability and age of athletes and partners</b>	<b>Similar age</b>
Differentiation: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Have attained sufficient &amp; necessary sport-specific skills and tactics</li> <li>2) No modifications of Official Special Olympics Sports Rules</li> <li>3) Eligible to advance to higher levels of play beyond the Program level (such as Regional and World Games)</li> </ol>	Differentiation: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Not <i>required</i> to be of similar ability</li> <li>2) Teammates of higher ability may serve as mentors to players of lower abilities</li> <li>3) Rules modifications can be used to define players' roles, promote meaningful involvement and prevent player dominance</li> <li>4) No advancement beyond the Program/State level</li> </ol>
Never comprised solely of individuals with disabilities	Never comprised solely of individuals with disabilities
Awards based on place of finish within divisions	SOVA will provide awards based on participation (same award for all)
Sample Team 	Sample Team 

### Helpful Unified Sports Links

Special Olympics Coaching Unified Sports Course <https://nfhslearn.com/courses/coaching-unified-sports>

Website resources. <https://www.specialolympicsva.org/sports/unified-sports>

Special Olympics Rules-Article 1 <https://tinyurl.com/Article1rules>

Unified Sports Models Comparison Chart = <https://tinyurl.com/CompvsPlayerDev>

Unified Sports Meaningful Involvement Principles = <https://tinyurl.com/meaningfulinvolvement>