A Comprehensive National Study of Special Olympics Programs in the United States

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INTRODUCTION

For nearly forty years, Special Olympics has been a worldwide leader in providing year-round sport training and competition opportunities to athletes with intellectual disabilities. The program began in 1962 when Eunice Kennedy Shriver started a day camp at her home for people with intellectual disabilities. In 1968, the First International Special Olympics Games were held at Soldier's Field in Chicago with 1,000 athletes from 26 states and Canada competing in three sports. Over the past 37 years, Special Olympics has grown to serve over 1.7 million athletes in over 150 countries, through 26 summer and winter sports.

In 2000, Special Olympics set a goal to reach two million athletes by the end of 2005. That same year, the first annual program census was conducted to obtain a baseline count of Special Olympics athletes. The census has subsequently developed into a significant store of data documenting athlete participation at all levels, organized by age, gender, and sport. Reaching beyond its original goal of tracking numbers of athletes and assessing growth numerically, these data have been used successfully to inform the different Special Olympics programs about their customers. The census has allowed Special Olympics to analyze trends in sports participation over time, as well as document changes in the way the organization measures athlete participation. Further, it provides insight into potential areas for program development and diversity.

However, there remains a great deal of information about athletes, families, and coaches that has not been collected through the current system. To fully understand athletes and their families, information also needs to be gathered about, for example, where they go to school, their job experiences, other sport experiences, and their perceptions of their Special Olympics participation. Further, from a program development standpoint, it is also important to understand what attracts athletes to Special Olympics and how their participation is maintained over time. Maintaining current levels of participation is a key contributor to growth; building from that participant base is the way growth is accelerated. Therefore, in order to fully understand growth within Special Olympics, it is necessary to recognize athletes' motivations for participating in, as well as leaving, Special Olympics Programs.

There is a large body of research regarding motivations for participating in and leaving sport programs for athletes without disabilities. Sport psychologists have studied athletes in a variety of sports, with differing levels of expertise. These researchers have also made strides in connecting motivations with athletes' continued participation in sport programs. Only recently has research on motivation for sport participation begun to include athletes with disabilities – physical and intellectual. This area of research has expanded specifically to include Special Olympics athletes; researchers are interested in understanding where these athletes fit within the larger context of sport. What is interesting and perhaps most important is that researchers have begun to realize that athletes with physical and intellectual disabilities are motivated to participate in sport in the same ways as athletes without disabilities.

The purpose of this study was to explore athletes' motivations for participating in and leaving Special Olympics Programs in the United States. In addition, specific factors contributing to athletes' motivations to leave Special Olympics were explored in greater detail. Motivations were considered within the context of athletes' characteristics, to provide a comprehensive view of the athletes within the framework of Special Olympics. The information collected from athletes, families, and coaches in this study was much more in-depth than the SOI Census and connected their educational and occupational experiences with their participation in Special Olympics over time. A multi-source approach was employed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of athletes participating in U.S. Special Olympics programs?
2. What motivates athletes to participate in Special Olympics?
3. What motivates athletes to leave Special Olympics?
4. What is the importance of Special Olympics programs as perceived by families and coaches?

METHODS

Participants

Twenty Special Olympics Programs representing seven of the eight U.S. Special Olympics regions were randomly selected based on state population and size of the Special Olympics Program. Special Olympics Program Directors were contacted and informed as to the nature of the study and the requirements for participation. Of the 20 programs contacted, 17 agreed to participate. The three that declined to participate did so based on the belief that their data management system was inadequate to participate in the study. The participating programs represented the following Special Olympics regions: Southwest, North Central, South Central, Great Lakes, Mid-Atlantic, New England, and Southeast.

The final sample for this study included 1,307 family members, 579 athletes, and 300 coaches participating in 17 state Special Olympics Programs. Of the 579 athletes, 303 were active in Special Olympics and 276 were inactive. Of the 1,307 family members, 555 were from families of active athletes, and 752 were from families of inactive athletes. The family members, athletes, and coaches who participated in this study were a representative sample. The family and athlete participants were randomly selected from lists of all athletes from each of the 17 Programs. Coaches were randomly selected from the same Programs as the athlete and family participants.

Athletes and their families were identified through the use of the Special Olympics Games Management System (GMS) software package. Researchers worked with GMS programmers and other experts on GMS to create an instruction guide to aid each state Program in creating lists of athletes. Athletes were identified as active or inactive based on the expiration date of their medical forms; these forms are generally updated every three years. Originally it was proposed that athletes be classified as active or inactive based on competition history within the last two years. These data would have provided the most accurate list of athletes and their families. However, based on the design of the GMS, competition history proved too difficult to disaggregate within the system.

Coaches were identified by individual state Programs. Due to confidentiality issues, in certain states coaches were informed that they may be contacted as a part of the survey (e.g. through the SO newsletter). In other states, no advance contact or information about the study was given.

An important factor for consideration was the response rate: 47% for family members of active athletes, and 30% for family members of inactive athletes. Appendix A1 summarizes these data and demonstrates the added complexity of locating the inactive sample as evidenced by the additional numbers required to reach the targets. Response rate was also important for the coaches' sample. It was calculated using the total number of attempted calls (excluding wrong numbers) versus completed interviews. The response rate varied widely for each Program, from 8% to 60% (see Appendix A2).

Instruments

The telephone survey instruments for families, athletes, and coaches were designed utilizing the following resources: 1) a review of the relevant literature, 2) input from Program directors, and 3) pilot testing. A thorough review of the literature in sport and exercise was conducted for athletes with and without physical and intellectual disabilities, at different ages and ability levels. Motives for participation in sport activities were identified and numerous questionnaires were reviewed to ascertain their reliability and validity in measuring motivation. A pilot questionnaire was then developed that included lists of motives derived from the evaluation of existing questionnaires and through the literature review. Program Directors in the United States and their staff (N = 92) were then asked to participate in an online survey designed to gain insight into their perceptions of athletes' motivations for participating in Special Olympics. Program Directors and their staff were asked to rate the likelihood that each item would be a "motive" for a Special Olympics athlete. In addition, Special Olympics staff were also given the opportunity to comment on the concepts themselves and the specific wording used in the questionnaire. Finally, staff were provided the opportunity to suggest additional motives.

Based on the data collected through the online survey, another pilot questionnaire was developed for use with athletes. Interviews were then carried out (both by telephone and in person) with active athletes (N = 52) from state Summer Games in four programs specifically chosen to be part of the pilot work. Inactive athletes (N = 25) were identified with the assistance of program staff, and interviewed by telephone.

Following this second pilot test, questions were adjusted to better reflect the receptive and expressive language skills of athletes, or removed based on redundancy or difficulty. Once the survey instrument was complete, a training manual was created for telephone interviewers and a training session was held at the Gallup Call Center in Omaha, NE (see Appendix B). During the training session, mock interviews were conducted with Special Olympics Global Messengers to help prepare Gallup interviewers for any issues that could arise during an actual phone interview (i.e. the need to rephrase questions, keep participants' attention, adjust their rate of speech, or the need to probe for more information).

The final survey instrument, *Special Olympics Athlete Participation Survey*, consisted of one section for family members and one section for athletes (see Appendix C1). The section for families included items on: demographics and sport history; motivation for participating in Special Olympics; and, the importance of Special Olympics Programs to athletes and families. The athlete section was similarly structured, but had a lesser focus on demographics. Some items were drawn from the Unified Sports Evaluation (Siperstein, Hardman, Wappet, & Clary, 2001), while others, specifically the demographic and sport history items, were developed to characterize the unique opportunities offered athletes with intellectual disabilities through Special Olympics. In addition, inactive athletes and their families were asked an additional set of questions concerning their motivation for leaving Special Olympics.

The final survey instrument for Special Olympics coaches was developed using items and ideas from the family questionnaire. (See Appendix C2.) Items included: demographics; sport and coaching history; motivation for coaching in Special Olympics; perceptions of athletes'

motivation for participating in and leaving Special Olympics; and the importance of Special Olympics to its participants. A final set of open-ended questions addressed resources, and strategies for maintaining participation, attracting new athletes, and bringing back inactive athletes. Inter-rater reliability for the coded responses to these questions is provided in Appendix A3.

Procedures

A multi-source approach, involving athletes, families, and coaches, was used to assess athletes' motivations for participating in and leaving Special Olympics Programs in the United States, as well as the factors that contribute to these motivations. The services of the Gallup Organization were utilized to administer the family and athlete questionnaires, while the coach questionnaire was administered by trained project staff.

Initially, the Gallup Organization received two randomly generated lists of athletes – active and inactive – from which participants were then randomly selected. Subsequently, two additional lists of inactive athletes were provided to Gallup to account for outdated contact information and difficulty in obtaining family and athlete participants.

For each phone call, the Gallup interviewer followed a scripted protocol where they introduced themselves and explained the purpose of the survey. Participants were informed that their responses were voluntary and confidential, and that they may decline to answer any question or terminate the call at any time. Family members were interviewed first. At the conclusion of the family interview, a screening for athlete participation was administered. It was at this time that the interviewer spoke to the family member about the athlete's ability to participate and what assistance, if any, the athlete would need. Due to variation in the receptive and expressive language abilities of athletes, there were some cases where only a family member was interviewed.

Project staff interviewed coaches using a scripted protocol where they introduced themselves and explained the purpose of the survey. Coaches were informed that their participation was voluntary and confidential, and that they may decline to answer any question or terminate the call at any time.

In the following section we have organized the presentation of the results into the following topic areas: a) Description of Coaches; b) Description of Athletes; c) Athletes' Motivations for Participating and Leaving; d) The Importance of Special Olympics as Perceived by Families and Coaches; and, e) Coaches' Suggested Strategies for Program Maintenance and Growth.

RESULTS

Description of Coaches

Learning about coaches' experience and knowledge provides information about the level of expertise they bring to Special Olympics. It is interesting to note that Special Olympics coaches in the United States are mostly female (74%), with a mean age of 48 years. Not surprising however, is that almost half of the coaches (44%) have a family member with an intellectual disability, and 39% have a family member who has participated in Special Olympics as an athlete. Moreover, one-third of coaches (33%) stated that they were originally motivated to coach in Special Olympics because of their personal experience with people with intellectual disabilities. Coaches also became involved with Special Olympics not only through a personal connection to an individual with intellectual disabilities, but also through their professional interests. Over one third (35%) of coaches indicated that they had decided to coach in Special Olympics because of their educational or occupational background in intellectual disabilities, for example, special education, physical education, or community living organizations.

Many coaches have also been involved in sports throughout their lives; well over half of the coaches (71%) reporting that they have played sports competitively. The sports played vary widely and include softball, baseball, tennis, and basketball, with almost all (80%) having played multiple sports. The competitive nature of coaches' sports involvement has also varied. Almost a quarter (22%) played sports at the college level, while a few (3%) have even played professionally. To put this in perspective, fewer than 15% of high school athletes in the United States ever play on college teams (National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA), 1996). This comparison suggests that coaches' background and experiences in sport provide them with extensive knowledge of training and competition.

Table 1. Coach Characteristics: Age, Education, and Sports Competition (N = 300).

	Frequency (%)
Age	
Under 40	23%
41 to 50	35%
51 to 60	29%
61 and older	13%
Level of school completed	
High school/Some college	35%
College graduate	35%
Post-graduate study	30%
Levels of competitive sport participation	
Recreational	9%
School	32%
College/Professional	25%

Although most coaches became involved in Special Olympics through volunteering, it is interesting to note that nearly half (48%) volunteered independent of an affiliation with a school, job, or other organization. That is, these coaches made the effort to get involved of their own volition and not through some type of recruitment campaign. In contrast, some coaches (13%) were paid to coach, as a part of their jobs; these include teaching or staff positions in group homes and agencies. Coaches are also involved with Special Olympics for a long time, with the average coach participating for 13 years. Further, 21% of those interviewed have been involved for 20 years or more. In addition to their work with Special Olympics, many coaches are also active at the community recreation level with 35% having coached teams in sport organizations outside of Special Olympics.

Once involved, almost all coaches (over 90%) completed some type of training in coaching, whether through Special Olympics or some other organization. Further, the majority also have extensive training in disabilities. The majority of the coaches (61%) are also certified in the sports they coach and generally, coaches are involved with more than one sport in Special Olympics. The most frequently coached Special Olympics sports are track and field, bowling, basketball, swimming, and softball.

Table 2. Coaches' involvement in Special Olympics.

	Frequency (%)
Initial involvement	
Volunteer	87%
Paid	13%
Source of volunteer involvement	
Independent	48%
School	25%
Job	18%
Civic group or Other	9%
Source of paid involvement	
School	27%
Group home/Agency	37%
Community organization	20%
Other (e.g., combination of above, county government)	17%
Years coaching in SO	
5 years or less	23%
6 to 10 years	23%
11 to 15 years	18%
16 to 20 years	15%
20 years or more	21%

Table 3. Coaches' training in sports and disabilities.

	Frequency (%)
Training in coaching	
General SO orientation	95%
SO Sport-specific training	93%
Unified Sports training	42%
Non-SO workshops	85%
College courses	52%
Training in disability	
Workshops	85%
Disability awareness	79%
Internships	54%
College courses	63%

Summary

Overall, the data suggest that Special Olympics coaches are well-trained and knowledgeable about sports. The typical Special Olympics coach is female, volunteered for the position, has coached an average of 13 years, and is between 40 and 60 years. The typical coach also has extensive training in the sports he/she coaches, training received through Special Olympics and through other non-SO sources. Coaches also are well trained in disabilities, having obtained this training through workshops, college courses or related activities. The typical coach also has been personally active in competitive sports. Generally coaches are involved with more than one sport with the most coached sports being track and field, bowling, basketball, and softball. The consistency of coaches' characteristics through regional analysis suggests that the coaches are a representative sample of Special Olympics coaches in the United States.

Description of Athletes

The characteristics of Special Olympics athletes were reported by their families. Overall, 60% of athletes are currently 19 years of age or older, and the majority joined Special Olympics before they turned 18, with 62% joining by age 13. While more than two-thirds of the athletes (67%) entered Special Olympics through a school program, another 16% became involved through a community-based program. It is interesting to note that all athletes, active and inactive, participate in Special Olympics for a significant part of their lives, with an average length of participation of 11 years. Only one in four inactive athletes participated for five years or less, giving further credence to the finding that athletes' average involvement is at least a decade. It is also encouraging to note that 14% of inactive athletes were involved for 21 years or more.

To gain insight as to athletes' lives outside of their involvement in Special Olympics, families were asked about their child's school and work experiences. One-third of the athletes are enrolled in regular public or private schools. For those athletes over age 18, 28% are employed in sheltered workshops, and 24% are employed in a business within the community.

Table 4. Athlete Characteristics: Age, Years of Involvement, Entry into Special Olympics, School/Employment Status (N = 1307)

	Frequency (%)
Age at Entry	
Under 18	87%
Over 18	13%
Years Involved in SO*	
5 years or less	24%
6 to 10 years	30%
11 to 20 years	32%
21 years or more	14%
Initial involvement in SO	
School-based program	67%
Community-based program	16%
Group home-based program	4%
Workplace-based program	3%
Independent/Other	10%
In School	
Regular public/private school	33%
Special/residential school	10%
Other/home schooled	2%
Employment (Over 18)	
Sheltered workshop	28%
Business in community	24%

* Data reported for inactive athletes only (N = 752).

Athletes participate in a wide range of the 26 available sports, with many athletes participating in multiple sports during their time with Special Olympics. As was previously confirmed by coaches, the most popular sports are track and field, bowling, basketball, softball, and swimming. Within Special Olympics, athletes can participate at different levels including training, competition, and social interaction. The majority of athletes (74%) participate in training activities and attend practice at least once a week. Many athletes (53%) also engage in social activities with teammates outside of training and competition several times a month.

While competition opportunities range from local tournaments to World Games, over half of the athletes (52%), have participated only at the local or regional levels. While many also go on to compete at the state level (38%), as expected, only a few (3%) ever compete globally.

Table 5. Athletes' involvement in Special Olympics.

	Frequency (%)
Sport Choice (Top 5)	
Track & field	31%
Bowling	17%
Basketball	14%
Softball	10%
Swimming	9%
Sports Training*	
Once or more per week	74%
A few times a month	4%
Once a month	1%
Never or rarely	12%
Socialization with teammates*	
Once or more per week	42%
A few times a month	11%
Once a month	6%
Never or rarely	37%
Highest level of SO competition*	
Local	38%
Regional/Area	14%
State	38%
World	3%

* Total does not equal 100% – due to "don't know" or "refused" responses.

Outside of their participation in Special Olympics, athletes have varying sport and physical activity experiences. For example, before becoming involved in Special Olympics, 30% of athletes participated in an organized sport program, including school sports or community recreation teams. While they are involved in Special Olympics, 20% of athletes are also involved with other (non-Special Olympics) organized sport programs. Also interesting is the fact that nearly half (48%) of all athletes engage in leisure-time physical activity (LTPA) or exercise outside of their involvement with Special Olympics for more than three hours per week. These exercise and LTPA include activities such as fitness and strength training or backyard baseball and basketball games with family and friends. This finding is even more noteworthy when you consider that less than 25% of the general population engages in three or more hours of LTPA per week (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS), 1996).

Table 6. Athletes' involvement in sports *outside of* Special Olympics.

	Frequency (%)
Played organized sports before SO	30%
Currently play non-SO organized sports	20%
Leisure-time physical activity/exercise (LTPA)*	
None	12%
Less than 1 hour	6%
1 to less than 3 hours/week	27%
3 to less than 6 hours/week	22%
6 to less than 10 hours/week	11%
10 hours or more/week	15%

* Total does not equal 100% – due to "don't know" or "refused" responses.

To fully understand athletes' involvement in Special Olympics, coaches were asked to describe the characteristics of an average Special Olympics team (see Table 7). The team profile provided allows us a unique glimpse into local Special Olympics Programs in that it not only explains the size and structure of teams, but also offers insight into athletes' participation experiences.

In general, the average Special Olympics team has 21 athletes, with a nearly equal distribution of males (52%) and females (48%). Coaches characterize 81% of their athletes as having either a mild or moderate disability. While most teams are composed of mixed age groups (68%), most often teams include participants ranging in ages from adolescent through adult. Since most athletes report becoming involved with Special Olympics through schools and other agencies, it is not surprising that most teams are organized by these same groups. In fact, only one-in-five teams are organized independently. In addition, consistent with data on athletes' average length of Special Olympics participation, coaches reported that nearly two-thirds of athletes (64%) remain on their teams for six or more years.

Table 7. Characteristics of the average Special Olympics team.

	Frequency (%)
Age Groups	
Same age groups	31%
Mixed age groups	68%
Organizer of team	
School	25%
Group home/Agency	32%
Community group	15%
Families of athletes	11%
Other/Independent	17%
Time athletes stay on team	
Up to 2 years	8%
2 to 5 years	30%
6 to 10 years	29%
More than 10 years	35%
Ability level of athletes *	
Mild disability	33%
Moderate disability	48%
Severe/Profound disability	19%

* Coaches were not asked to distinguish cognitive ability from impairments that would affect sport participation or performance (e.g., motor, vision, hearing).

Summary

Overall, the typical Special Olympics athlete initially becomes involved through a school based program before age 18, and participates for 11 years or more. The length of participation is the same for all athletes, regardless of whether they are currently active Special Olympics participants or not. The typical SO athlete also attends practice at least once a week and participates in competitions at the local or regional levels. Nearly half also engage in LTPA, or exercise outside of SO more than three times a week. Finally, the typical SO athlete participates on a mixed age team organized by a school or community organization/agency with other athletes with mild to moderate disabilities. The profile of the typical Special Olympics athlete is representative of all Special Olympics participants, as demonstrated through the consensus between sources (families and coaches) and by the similarity of responses across demographic variables and regions.

Athlete Motivation for Participating in or Leaving Special Olympics

Motives for Participating

Families, athletes and coaches were asked about what motivates athletes to participate in Special Olympics. Initially, families and athletes were asked the open-ended question: "Why does/did [name] participate in Special Olympics?" A subsequent series of questions was then asked about specific motivations for participation. Coaches were also asked about athletes' specific motivations for participation in Special Olympics and were asked to consider each question in the context of all of the athletes they have ever coached.

When initially asked, athletes and their families most frequently reported that their motivations for participation were fun and socialization. Other frequently reported motivations included winning and competition. Overall, not only did athletes and their families essentially agree on motives for participating in Special Olympics, but motives were consistent across gender, age and sport. It is important to point out that the motives for participation were essentially the same for both active and inactive athletes. The motives least often mentioned by athletes and their families are also in Table 8. These included participating because of the influence of others (i.e., not wanting to disappoint friends, participating because parents wanted them to) or because Special Olympics provides a welcoming environment (i.e., a place where an athlete would not be made fun of).

Parents' and athletes' spontaneous responses to the open ended questions mirrored the items asked in the closed-ended portion. Therefore, in the following section, we are only presenting the spontaneous responses. Further, for the analysis, all responses were coded into the following categories: fun/enjoyment, social aspects, winning/competition, health/fitness, competence/improvement, influence of significant others, welcoming environment, school-oriented activity, and having something to do. Table 9 presents a sample of the actual responses given by families when asked the following question: "Why does/did [name] participate in Special Olympics?".

Table 8. Athletes' motives for participation, as reported by athletes and families.

	Athletes (N = 579)	**Families (N = 1307)**
Most Often Mentioned		
Fun / Enjoyment	97%	94%
Social Aspects	96%	88%
Winning / Competition	95%	85%
Least Often Mentioned		
Influence of Significant Others	30%	48%
Welcoming Environment	47%	44%

Table 9. Athletes' motives for participation: Examples of athlete and family responses.

Category	Family Open-Ended Responses	Athlete Open-Ended Responses
Fun / Enjoyment	"Enjoys the thrill of the game" "It made him feel like someone"	"I just like playing sports" "To have a good time"
Social Aspects	"He loves to be around people like his peers" "To interact with other people of his age"	"I like to see my friends" "You get to meet a lot of other athletes from different teams"
Winning / Competition	"Liked being able to compete with others" "He is the most competitive person I have ever known"	"To knock the pins down" "Winning medals"

Coaches generally agreed with both athletes and their families on athletes' motives for participating in Special Olympics. That is, coaches believe that athletes participate for the fun (90%), the social aspects (87%), and winning and competition (84%). This clearly demonstrates that coaches are aware of their athletes and their families and clearly understand why they are participating in Special Olympics. Again, similar to families and athletes, coaches did not consider the influence of parents and friends nor being in an environment where athletes are not stigmatized as major motives for participating.

Motives for Leaving

To understand why inactive athletes left Special Olympics, the inactive athletes and their families were asked about the motivations to leave Special Olympics. Coaches were also asked for reasons why they believe their athletes leave. As with reasons for participation, families and athletes were initially asked an open-ended question ("Why did [name] leave Special Olympics?"). A subsequent series of questions was then asked about specific motivations for leaving.

The top reasons reported by athletes and their families for leaving were system issues and changes in interests. As was true for the motives for participating, athletes and their families agreed upon the reasons for leaving Special Olympics. System issues included transition events

that proved to be significant milestones in the athlete's life, and are mostly related to changes in school situations such as graduation, or transition from school to work. Changes in interests take into account not only athletes' desire to participate in non-Special Olympics activities, but also the lost appeal of sports in general. Athletes' varied interests and obligations outside of Special Olympics included academic responsibilities, jobs and volunteer opportunities, and hobbies that do not involve physical activity. There were also several motives that were not often mentioned by athletes and their families as reasons for leaving, including family relocation, athlete injuries and health problems, or limited access to transportation to practice (see Table 10). These findings were consistent by current age, gender, geographic region, and sports.

As we might expect, the motivations for leaving differed by athletes' age of entry into the Program, in that athletes who entered Special Olympics under age 18 left more often due to system issues than those athletes who entered SO over age 19. These differences were solely based on age of entry into the program and were not based on athletes' current age or the length of time spent in Special Olympics Programs. In general, athletes who entered the program at a younger age (under age 18) were more likely to leave due to issues of transition, such as change in schools, or graduation. On the other hand, athletes who joined Special Olympics over the age of 19 were more likely to leave because they became interested in other activities outside of sports.

As with the motivations for participation, families' and athletes' spontaneous responses to the open ended questions mirrored the items asked in the closed-ended portion. Therefore, in the following section, we only present the spontaneous responses. For the analysis, families' and athletes' responses were coded into the following categories: system issues, changes in interest, injury/health, relocation, transportation, opportunities for competition, and social pressures/stigma. Table 11 presents a sample of the actual responses given by families and athletes when asked the following question: "Why did [name] leave Special Olympics?".

Table 10. Athletes' motives for leaving, as reported by athletes and families.

	Athletes (N = 276)	**Families (N = 752)**
Most Often Mentioned		
System Issues	77%	69%
Changes in Interest	76%	54%
Least Often Mentioned		
Injury / Health	18%	18%
Relocation	14%	9%
Transportation	3%	6%

Table 11. Athletes' motives for leaving: Examples of athlete and family responses.

Category	Family Open-Ended Responses	Athlete Open-Ended Responses
System Issues	"Graduated from school, no other team" "The school he went to no longer supported Special Olympics"	"Got into high school and couldn't find out when it was" "Teacher stopped doing it"
Change in Interests	"Involved in other family activities" "Wasn't interested in the sports they offered"	"I have so much going on in my life right now, like my job and volunteering" "Interfered with school work"

As with athletes and families, coaches agreed that most athletes leave Special Olympics due to system issues or changes in interests. More specifically, coaches believe that athletes leave because they experience problems during the transition out of high school (71%) or because they were interested in other activities beyond sports (65%). This further demonstrates coaches' connection to athletes and their families and their awareness of the reasons athletes leave Special Olympics. Again, similar to families and athletes, coaches did not consider limitations in access to transportation or athlete health problems to be major motives for leaving.

Summary

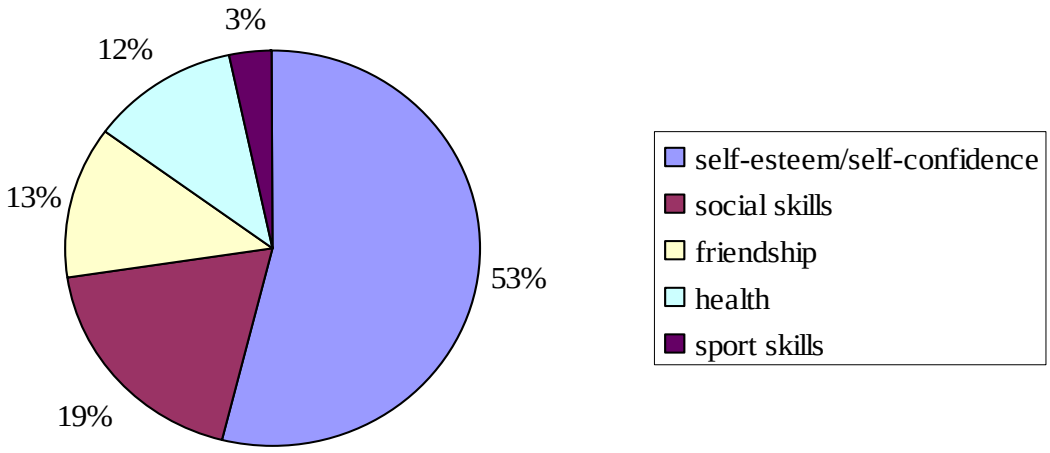
Overall, there was a strong consensus among athletes, families and coaches as to why the typical athlete participates in Special Olympics. All agree that the main reasons that athletes participate is for his/her own enjoyment, for the social aspects and for the competition. These reasons were consistent for both active and inactive athletes, which suggests universality in athletes' reasons for participating in Special Olympics. The main reasons for an athlete to leave Special Olympics were also agreed upon by athletes, families and coaches and include system issues, (i.e., programs ending after graduation from school) or loss of interest. It is important to note that system issues, particularly with regard to transition, seem to affect younger athletes more often than those athletes that join Special Olympics over age 19, for whom change in interests is the primary reason for leaving. Finally, athletes' reasons for participating in and leaving Special Olympics can be generalized to all Special Olympics participants in the U.S., as demonstrated through the concurrence between sources (athletes, families, and coaches) and by the similarity of responses across demographic variables and regions.

The Importance of Special Olympics as Perceived by Families and Coaches

In addition to being asked about the reasons athletes participate in Special Olympics, families and coaches were asked about their goals for athletes' participation in Special Olympics, and in what areas they saw improvement. First, families and coaches were asked to rate the top goal they held for athletes' participation in Special Olympics from a list of five (improved sport skills, self-esteem and self-confidence, health, adaptive behavior [like self-help skills], and friendship). After identifying the top goals, families and coaches were also asked to rate athletes' improvement in those goal areas.

The most important goal families held for their athlete was improved self-esteem and self-confidence (53%) (see Figure 1). The next top goals were improved social skills, reported by 19% of families, and improved friendship, reported by 13% of families. Considering that Special Olympics is a sports program, it is interesting that for the majority of families, their top goal focused on the social and personal aspects of sport participation, and *not* on sports skill development. Surprisingly, only 3% of families rated improved sport skills as their number one goal for their athletes' participation in Special Olympics.

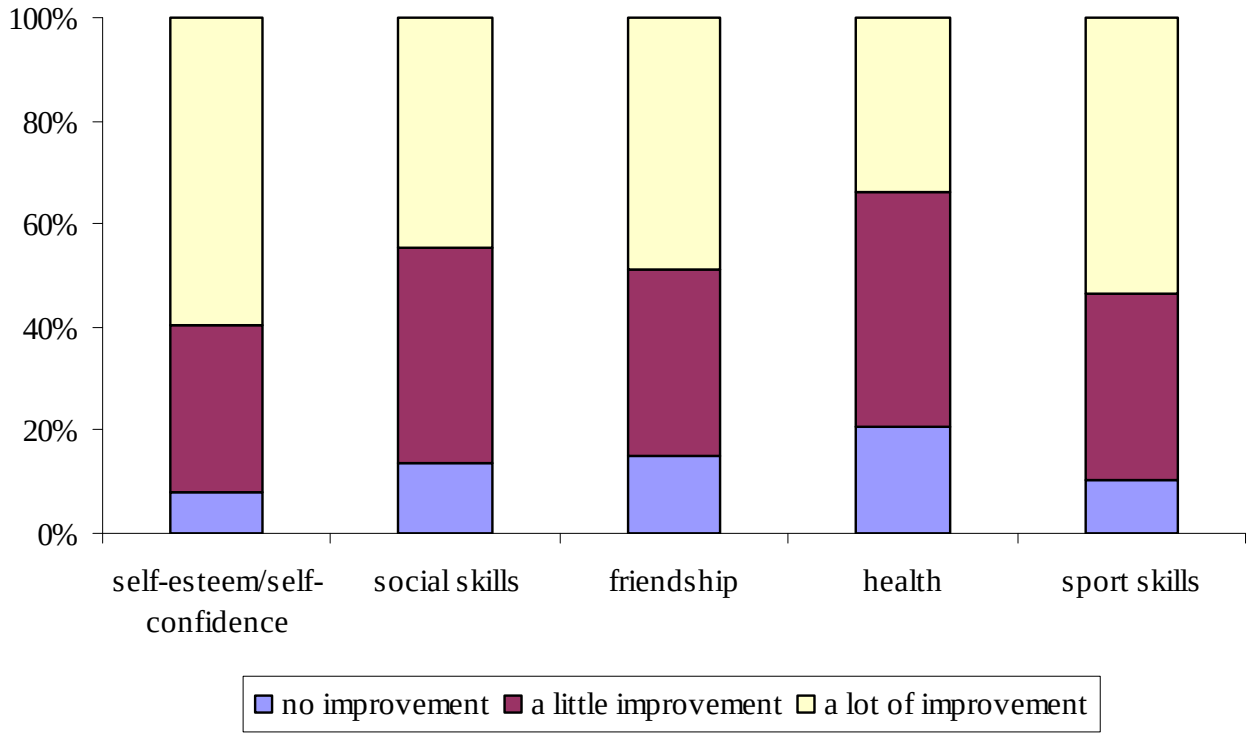
Figure 1. Family's top goal for athlete participation (N = 1307).



After identifying their top goal, families were asked to rate their athletes' improvement not only in their top goal, but also in their second and third ranked goals as well. That is, families were asked to rate the extent to which their athlete had *improved* in three separate areas as a result of their participation in Special Olympics on a continuum of: no improvement, a little improvement, or a lot of improvement. Overall, families saw improvement in their athlete for every goal they ranked as important. As can be seen in Figure 2, not only did the majority of families rate self-esteem and self-confidence as their top goal, but they also saw significant

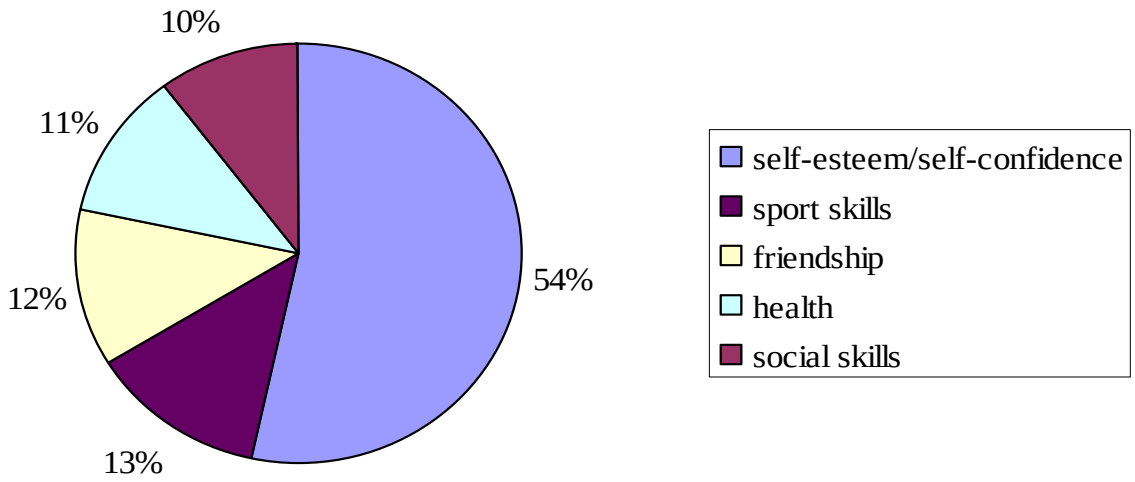
improvement in that area. Improvement was also seen by families in the areas of friendship and social skills. The few families that ranked improved sport skills as the top goal for their athletes also saw improvement in this area.

Figure 2. Family perceptions of athlete improvement.



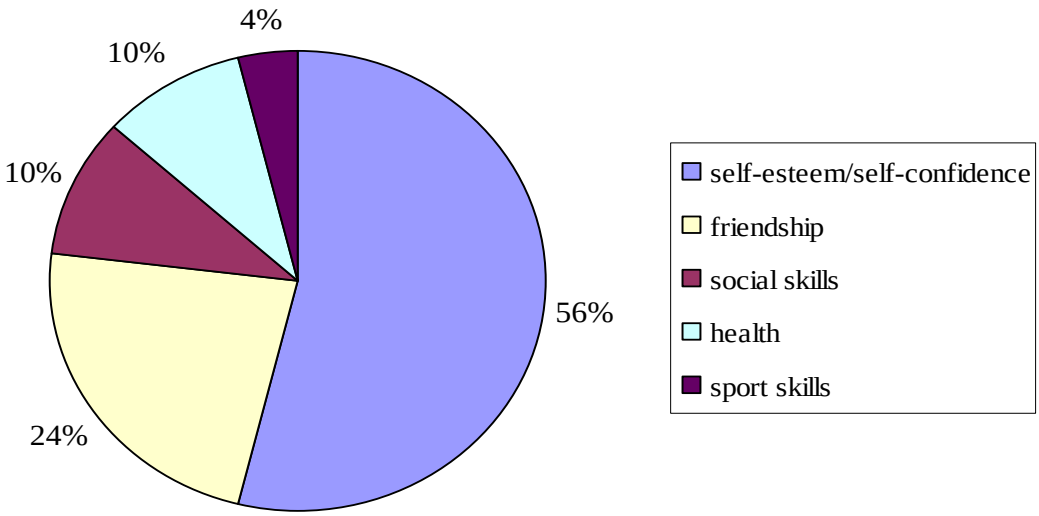
As was true when identifying motives for participation, coaches' goals for their athletes closely aligned with the families' goals for their children. Similar to family responses, most coaches considered improved self-esteem and self-confidence to be their number one goal for athletes. The second most important goal was improved friendship and the third, improved social skills (see Figure 3). Additionally, like families, coaches ranked improved sport skills as a low order goal when compared with their ranking of social and personal goals.

Figure 3. Coaches' top goal for athlete participation (N = 300).



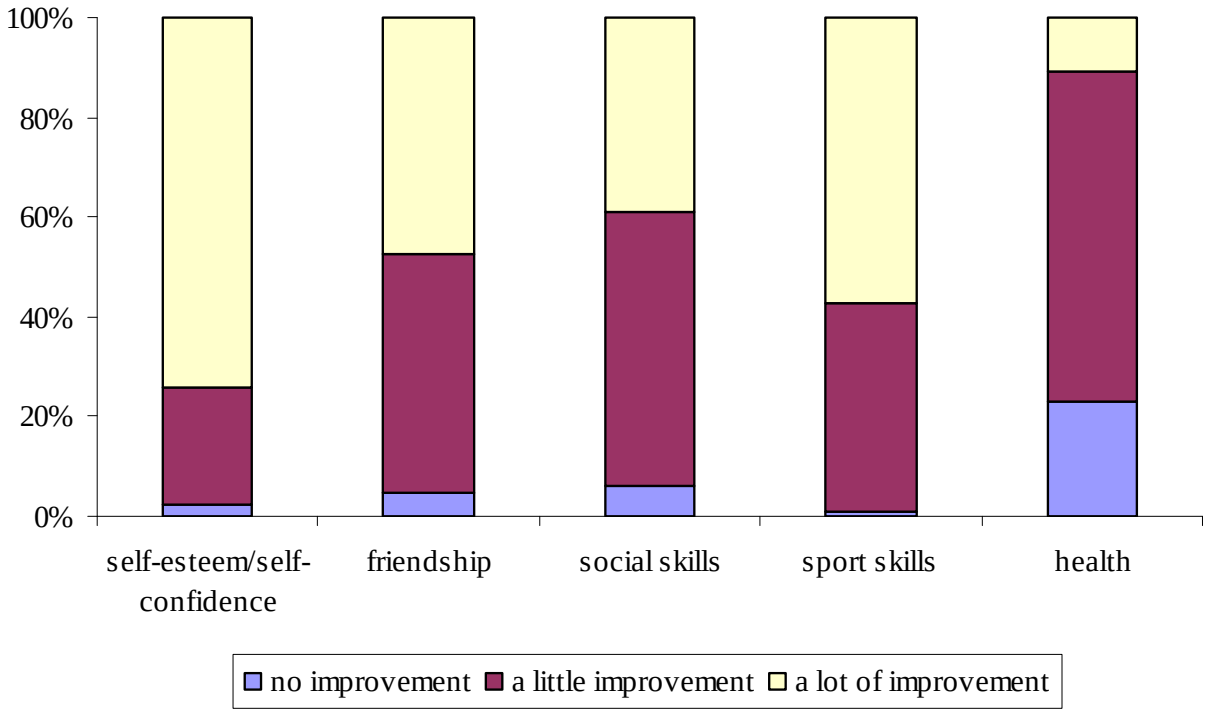
In addition to being asked about their own goals, coaches were also asked what they believed to be families' number one goal for their athletes' participation in Special Olympics. Overall, when compared to families' responses (see Figure 1), coaches were able to accurately identify families' top goal for participation. That is, 56% of coaches identified improved self-esteem and self-confidence as the number one reason families involve their children in Special Olympics (see Figure 4). It is not surprising that coaches are able to accurately predict the goals families hold for their children when one considers that nearly two of five of coaches are family members of a Special Olympics athlete.

Figure 4. Coaches' perceptions of the top family goal for athlete participation (N = 300).



Finally, coaches were asked to rate the extent to which most athletes had *improved* upon the five goal areas as a result of their participation in Special Olympics, on a continuum of: no improvement, a little improvement, or a lot of improvement. While this question was also asked of families, coaches were asked to consider improvement in all five areas. Coaches observed improvement in all areas for their athletes, with the most evident in the areas of self-esteem and self-confidence, followed by improvement in sport skills (see Figure 5). Coaches' responses also confirmed families' perceptions of improvement.

Figure 5. Coach perceptions of athlete improvement.



Although improvement in sport skills was not a top goal for coaches, many coaches recognized that athletes' sport skills did improve as a result of their participation in Special Olympics. It is important to note that families also reported a lot of improvement in this area, although again, it was not seen overall as a top goal by the majority of the families. Coaches' perceptions of athlete improvement were consistent across the different sports coached and this improvement was seen in team sports as well as individual sports. Furthermore, coaches who have been coaching for only a few years also saw improvement in their athletes, similar to coaches who had been coaching for over a decade.

Summary

Overall, the consistency of responses between the coaches and families of active and inactive athletes suggests that their perceptions about goals for participation and improvement on these goals are representative of all U.S. Special Olympics participants. Families of athletes and coaches agree that their top goal for athletes' participating in Special Olympics is improved self-esteem and self-confidence, followed by improved friendship and social skills, consistent with the findings of the Unified Sports Evaluation. Furthermore, coaches are also very knowledgeable about families' expectations for their children's participation in Special Olympics, as is seen in their ability to accurately identify families' goals. Families and coaches see marked improvement in all of the goals that they set for their athletes, particularly in the areas of self-esteem and self-confidence. Additionally, the significant improvement observed by families is confirmed by coaches who also see similar levels of progress. Further, this improvement was seen across the different sports.

Coaches' Suggested Strategies for Program Maintenance and Growth

Coaches have the most regular contact with athletes and program staff alike, which makes them a unique and valuable source for identifying opportunities for program growth and development. Therefore, coaches were asked for their perspectives on ways to maintain current participation, attract new athletes, and bring back inactive athletes. Because many inactive athletes left Special Olympics because of difficulties in transition between school programs or between school programs and adult programs, coaches were specifically asked to think about transition as it related to maintaining participation. They were also asked to think about what families, local Special Olympics organizers, and state Special Olympics staff can do to help.

Overall, coaches responded positively about current efforts, indicating that they believe that Special Olympics is essentially doing a good job. Most ideas and strategies mentioned by coaches were offered with the intention of supplementing and enhancing current efforts. The major suggestion that coaches offered regarding athlete participation is that there needs to be action at all levels – with the family, with local Special Olympics organizers, and with state Special Olympics staff.

Maintaining Athlete Participation

Most coaches agreed (63%) that families play an important role in athletes' continued participation in Special Olympics and at a minimum, need to provide support to their athletes. Support was defined by the coaches as a family member being present at practices and competitions, and by families providing their athlete with emotional support. Another area recognized by coaches as needing improvement was the area of communication. Many coaches agreed (45%) that there is a need for better communication, particularly communication between Special Olympics staff (at both the local and state levels) and families and their athletes.

Coaches also addressed the significance of providing quality programming to families and athletes. Almost half of the coaches agreed (41%) that athlete participation could be better maintained if Special Olympics organizers provided quality programming that meets the needs of its athletes. This type of programming should include, for example, allowing them ample opportunities for competition and appropriately adjusting programs to their levels of capability.

Table 14. Coaches' suggestions for maintaining athlete participation.

Families: Need to provide emotional support	"Be involved and support them" "Show up to games and support them" "Encourage them just like any other athlete, go to games, tell them you're proud of them"
Local SO Organizers: Need to facilitate communication and provide more quality programs	"Keep athletes and families notified and keep lines of communication open" "Run a quality program and keep promises" "Make sure that those who try out have an opportunity to compete"
State SO Staff: Need to facilitate communication and provide more quality programs	"Ensure good communication with the athlete, keep updated records so they can be tracked" "Keep families informed with current information" "Expose them to new sports" "Broaden the program for older athletes"

To help maintain participation as athletes make transitions, such as changing schools, making the transition between school and work, or moving to another location, coaches offered a number of suggestions. An overwhelming majority of coaches (88%) believed that local SO organizers need to take the lead in this area. They suggested that it is the local SO groups that should provide support and information to families and their athletes during periods of transition. This support includes informing families about available programs, facilitating communication between families and new programs, and providing a network through which coaches are able to maintain contact with the athletes as they change programs.

Many coaches also believed that state SO staff need to be more involved in maintaining participation during transition periods. Over half of the coaches agreed (58%) that the state SO staff could do more to ensure better communication and could do more to be involved with local SO organizers. For example, staff should work to provide information to families about new programs and to provide them with contact information for other coaches in their area. Finally, many coaches (41%) suggested that families could help their athlete during times of transition by providing them with emotional support. Moreover, a third of all coaches believed that families' active participation during the transition process was imperative to the athletes' success.

Table 15. Coach suggestions for maintaining athlete participation during transition.

Families: Need to provide emotional support	"Encourage athlete to continue on being part of the team, support the team, promote their value" "Be positive about changes" "Go to other league prior to making the switch – get to know other parents" "Inform new program of what the athlete likes to do and what he/she is good at"
Local SO Organizers: Need better communication	"Help parents facilitate transitions for their athletes, build bridges between schools and programs" "Make initial contact at new program or notify a state or area" "Share information between programs about the athlete"
State SO Staff: Need better communication and need to provide more support	"Be aware of what athlete's needs are, what the events are, have good information and get it to those who need it" "Better paper trail – be able to access the state for information about athletes" "Become a part of the school system's transition team" "Offer a listing of what sports are available in other towns"

Attracting New Athletes

In addition to being asked about the ways to maintain participation and better facilitate transitions, coaches were also asked for their ideas to attract new athletes to Special Olympics. Most coaches agreed that to attract new athletes there needs to be a coordinated effort including all parties involved – families, local SO organizers and state SO staff. Almost half of the coaches (48%) suggested that a good way to attract athletes would be for local and state SO staff to reach out to schools, community organizations, and group homes. More specifically, SO staff could make better use of the media to increase the visibility of Special Olympics events. In fact, nearly all coaches (80%) suggested that state SO staff should make better use of the media to garner publicity to attract new athletes. Further, coaches suggested that Special Olympics could host more specialized events, such as invitational events. Similarly, a few coaches (11%) mentioned that offering increasing levels of competition and more diversity in the sports available may be a good way to attract more athletes. Finally, coaches suggested that a good

way to attract new athletes would be to identify ways to integrate Special Olympics Programs into community sport programs. This might involve partnering with the community Parks and Recreation department or other organization offering sport opportunities to adults.

Coaches also believed that families could attract new athletes by utilizing their personal networks. All coaches (94%) believed that families should be reaching out to friends, people they know within their churches, schools and local communities. Additionally, families should collaborate with their athletes' coaches and local SO organizers by helping with new athlete and family referrals.

Table 16. Coach suggestions for attracting new athletes.

Families: Perform outreach	"Spread the word" "Bring a friend" "Talk to kids in their child's class"
Local SO Organizers: Need to perform more outreach	"Contact more group homes" "Get involved in schools and do more Unified Sports, because once they get involved they will most likely be in it for life" "Help in getting them involved by having residential homes and communities be a part of SO" "Make a presentation to the service provider agencies" "Make sure kids are exposed – hook them up with an SO athlete"
State SO Staff: Need to perform more outreach (media use) and provide more program options	"SO open house – bring in high profile sports figure to attract people to event" "Make commercials talking about SO, not just at State Games time" "PR throughout the state, press releases – newspapers, TV stations to advertise events and accomplishments, endorse SO as a valuable source for people with special needs" "Offer a sports day and do a demonstration of different sports for people to see" "Mix the SO and other community adult teams" "Have more available cross-state competitions"

Bringing Back Inactive Athletes

Finally, coaches were asked for their ideas to bring inactive athletes back to Special Olympics. The majority of coaches (60%) suggested that reaching out to families and athletes personally was a very good way to bring back inactive athletes, including for example, telephone calls to families and athletes, visits to their homes, and mailed correspondence. Coaches suggested that this type of contact would not only be a good way to encourage athletes to return, but most importantly, will help Special Olympics staff better understand athletes' reasons for leaving the program. Coaches also suggested that inactive athletes might be interested in returning to Special Olympics in other capacities. Former athletes may be interested in working as an assistant coach, for example. Inactive athletes may also be interested in fitness programs not part of competition. Finally, coaches also suggested that although not competing within Special Olympics, inactive athletes may still be interested in participating in team social activities. Continued participation in team social events, as well as maintenance of connections with peers, could also lead inactive athletes to become active again.

Table 17. Coaches' suggestions for bringing back inactive athletes.

Local SO Organizers and State SO Staff: Need to reach out to inactive athletes personally and consider alternative levels of involvement	"Continue to contact families and find out why they left or try to get them involved in another program" "Get an inactive list – visit all the inactive athletes and re-pitch the program" "Personal invitation to come back, sometimes we don't even ask" "Adult fitness maintenance program" "Give them more responsibility, such as assistant coach, warm-up coach, etc." "Athlete leadership instead of competing in sports" "For older population, expand Masters' sports…more leisure sports"

The most encouraging and perhaps the most important finding is that the majority of families of inactive athletes and the inactive athletes themselves expressed a willingness and desire to resume participation within Special Olympics. In fact, more than two-thirds of the families and athletes stated that they would return to Special Olympics if afforded the opportunity, regardless of the reasons why they left (i.e., system issues, program availability, transportation issues or health).

Summary

Coaches provided insight into the possibilities for maintaining and growing Programs through the efforts of three critical stakeholders – athletes' families, local SO Program organizers, and state SO staff. Steps for action included using personal networks, targeting outreach to specific groups within the community, and building community awareness about Special Olympics. In addition, coaches saw the importance of finding new ways to reach out and include inactive athletes in their programs. Ideas for this involvement ranged from inviting inactive athletes to regular team social activities to encouraging them to become assistant coaches. Finally, these steps for action were further confirmed by families and athletes, who were asked about their interest to return if the barriers to participation were resolved. A significant number of inactive athletes and their families stated that efforts by coaches, state SO staff, and local SO organizers to involve them again would be successful.

CONCLUSIONS

Each of the findings in this study contributes to a comprehensive view of Special Olympics athletes in the United States, and provides insight into their experiences in sports. This view includes: (a) who Special Olympics athletes are; (b) what motivates athletes to participate in or leave Special Olympics; and (c) what the importance of Special Olympics is, as perceived by families and coaches.

Athlete Characteristics

- When provided the opportunity, Special Olympics athletes can speak for themselves and provide valuable insights into their lives.

- People with intellectual disabilities come to Special Olympics during childhood and on average participate for more than a decade.

- There is a successful partnership between Special Olympics and schools. More than two-thirds of all athletes join Special Olympics through a school based program.

- Throughout their lives, Special Olympics athletes take advantage of the variety of individual and team sports offered through the movement and participate in multiple sports - from track and field to bowling to basketball and softball.

- When participating in Special Olympics, athletes have the opportunity to compete not only in their community games, but also can advance to regional, state, national and even world-wide competitions. In fact, over half of the Special Olympics athletes advance beyond their local competitions to compete at the regional and state level.

- Special Olympics athletes are serious in their endeavor to be physically fit and to be competitive. Most athletes (3 out of 4) participate in Special Olympics training more than once a week. In addition, nearly half of all athletes also participate in physical activity beyond their participation in Special Olympics. In fact, the Special Olympics athlete engages in more physical activity per week than the average person without a disability.

Athlete Motivation for Participating in or Leaving Special Olympics

- Special Olympics athletes are motivated to participate by their enjoyment for sports and for the social opportunities if affords. They are similarly motivated by the competition Special Olympics provides. In the athletes' own words, "I like to prove to myself that I can do it."

- Special Olympics athletes enjoy the social experiences that accompany participation in sports training and competition. Teammates provide an important and valuable source of friendship. (Over half of the athletes socialize with their teammates outside of Special Olympics.) In fact, a comprehensive study of the attitudes of youth in the United States showed no intention on their behalf to interact with people with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, it is clear that SO is an important channel for individuals with ID to develop social relationships.

- The main reasons athletes leave Special Olympics are life transitions; graduating from school, getting a job, and changing interests.

The Importance of Special Olympics as Perceived by Families and Coaches

- Families of athletes with intellectual disabilities want the same for their children as all other families. Parents hope that by participating in sports their children feel good about themselves and develop a strong sense of self-confidence and self-esteem.

- Coaches in Special Olympics know their athletes and their motivations for participating. Three out of four coaches (76%) share athletes' and families' goals for participation, such as improved sense of self and more positive social experiences.

- The benefits of participation in Special Olympics are substantial for its athletes. There is strong consensus between coaches and family members that there is significant improvement in athletes' sense of self, social skills and social interactions as a result of their participation in Special Olympics.

Overall, Special Olympics athletes are similar to all athletes. Special Olympics athletes share the same motivations, goals, and interests in sports as athletes in any other organized sports program. Through training and competition, Special Olympics athletes are provided with new experiences and opportunities to advance their sport careers. The quality of the Special Olympics experience for athletes can be attributed to the experience and knowledge level of its coaches. As an organization, Special Olympics continues to shape itself according to the changing developmental needs of its athletes as they transition through childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the results of this study validate what has been intuitively known for 40 years, as well as what has been reported in other recent investigations: that Special Olympics has great value and utility for people with intellectual disabilities. Moreover, finding that Special Olympics satisfies its customers' needs at a consistent, high level is a noteworthy measure of success, and the findings emphasize the importance of continuing to provide quality social experiences through achievement in sports to people with intellectual disabilities.

In the following section a number of recommendations are offered to guide Special Olympics to continue to build on its past successes to reach out to new constituents and work towards becoming a lifelong experience for its participants. These recommendations are a result of the most comprehensive study of Special Olympics Programs in the United States which, using a multi-source approach, examined the characteristics of Special Olympics athletes, their motivation to participate in, or leave the program, and the overall importance of Special Olympics programs to its athletes. It is hoped that the ideas presented below guide Special Olympics in its work to bring positive experiences to individuals with intellectual disabilities not only within the United States, but to those throughout the world.

Athlete Characteristics

This study presents a national profile of athlete characteristics in U.S. Special Olympics Programs. The information contained in the profile extends beyond what is currently available in the SO annual program census and heretofore has not been reported. Perhaps most importantly, this profile is a reflection of athletes' total experiences in Special Olympics over the course of their lives. As such, the investigators recommend:

> *A more complete profile of athlete characteristics should be made available nationally. Special Olympics should collect information on, for example, the average age and location of initial involvement at program entry; ability levels; sports training participation; socialization with teammates; competition levels; and sports/LPTA activities outside the movement, in an effort to .*

Currently, athlete data is primarily maintained for divisioning and competition registration. By expanding its application to the development of athlete profiles on a national basis, Special Olympics will be better positioned to provide U.S. programs with updated information that will facilitate program development and result in a broader understanding of athlete characteristics, needs, and preferences.

Athlete Motivation for Participating in or Leaving Special Olympics

This study surveyed athletes, families, and coaches as a means to understand the reasons why SO athletes remain in the movement over time, and why they leave. The findings indicate a remarkable consistency in responses among all three participant groups. Athletes remain in the movement because SO is fun, creates opportunities to socialize with others, and results in a strong sense of self-worth through winning and competition. Interestingly, athletes over the age

of 19 agree that SO is fun and entertaining, but ironically many may leave for the very reasons that younger athletes stay: the high emphasis on sports training and competition.

> *Special Olympics athlete recruitment and retention strategies should place more emphasis on the differing needs and preferences of athletes across the lifespan, which would better reflect the situation in the general population.*

Consistent with the research on adult lifestyles within the general population, athletes over the age of 19 indicate a greater interest in fitness and recreational sports. Since recreational sports often allow an individual to participate in competitive activities without the rigors of a daily or weekly training regimen, SO may have to assess how to "stay on mission" while responding to the needs of older athletes. For these individuals, socialization through recreational sports is a major incentive to stay in the movement. As recommended by coaches who participated in this study:

> *Special Olympics should consider integrating its programs into the community through the development of partnerships with parks and recreation departments or other organizations offering sports opportunities to adults.*

The development of community partnerships, as well as ensuring on-going communication with families during the transition years is also an effective means for responding to system issues that serve as a disincentive for participation beyond the school years. Athletes and families frequently mentioned the transition from school into adult life as a major barrier to staying involved. During this time, many athletes in school-based programs lose access to SO training and competition.

> *Special Olympics should take the initiative to build community networks and conduct outreach activities that will support athletes and families during the transition from school to adult life.*

Building bridges between school and community programs is an important way to keep families informed about SO programs that are available for adults, as well as providing a network through which coaches are able to maintain contact with the athletes as they change programs. Coaches made several recommendations regarding the creation of community networks, including targeting outreach to specific groups within the community and building community awareness through the media and personal contacts. Coaches also suggested ways to create incentives for inactive athletes to return to the movement, such as inviting them to team social activities and encouraging them to become assistant coaches.

The Importance of Special Olympics as Perceived by Families and Coaches

Special Olympics sports training and competition is highly valued by athletes and their families. The importance of this participation, however, extends far beyond the competitive aspects of the program into personal and social development.

As strategies are developed to attract new athletes around the world, as well as return those who have become inactive, Special Olympics should strongly emphasize the importance of sports competition as a vehicle for personal and social growth among people with intellectual disabilities.

The study results affirm that while continuing its efforts to expand the number of programs around the world, Special Olympics must also continue to foster a better understanding of athlete characteristics, needs and aspirations. As the results of this study indicate, athlete motivations for participation in SO are consistent with, but also extend beyond, the movement's stated mission of sports training and competition.