

DEVELOPING YOUR COACHING PHILOSOPHY

Introduction

Offering quality training for Special Olympics athletes is the key role of a Special Olympics coach. If coaches are educated in coaching methods and techniques, then the mission of Special Olympics in offering quality sports training and athletic competition is enhanced.

Special Olympics Coach Definition

A Special Olympics coach is a person who selects, assesses and provides Special Olympics athletes with comprehensive sports training and preparation for competitions, knowing, understanding and abiding by the rules of the sport being coached, Special Olympics General Rules and Official Sports Rules. The Special Olympics coach is responsible for providing athletes with comprehensive sport training and preparation for multilevel sport competition.

Developing Your Coaching Philosophy

There are many more similarities than differences in coaching athletes with and without learning disabilities. Athletes are athletes; coaching is coaching; and learning is learning. The major difference you will encounter in coaching Special Olympics athletes is that they may learn at a slower pace. Regardless, you will still need to develop a coaching philosophy and style that will enable your athletes to meet their performance goals and develop sportsmanship.

As you begin developing your coaching philosophy, ask yourself: Why am I coaching? Who am I coaching? What kind of coach do I want to be?

The answers to these questions will impact every thought, every action and every decision you make as a coach. You bring your thoughts and ideas from each facet of your life in developing your coaching philosophy.

Identifying Your Coaching Philosophy / style

Your coaching philosophy / style is simply the way you see situations and experiences and the value you give them.

Coaches must understand that the Special Olympics philosophy, their own coaching philosophy and the philosophies of everyone involved, play important roles in the success of their coaching so it is important to continue to ask yourself:

1. What am I trying to achieve for myself?
2. What do I want to achieve with my athletes?
3. What is my coaching style?
4. What is my motivation for coaching?

Developing Your Coaching Objectives

In Special Olympics, we want our coaches to place athlete development at the top of their coaching objectives, followed by fun and winning because we do not de-emphasise winning in Special Olympics. We know that our athletes train hard and long to win the gold. However, as we mentioned previously, coaching a Special Olympics athlete is like coaching any other athlete. Coaches that are most successful place athlete development first. By placing athlete development first, athletes are more likely to produce better performances with greater consistency and athletes and coaches derive more satisfaction than by emphasising winning at all costs.

Winning

Many coaches face the issue of winning when developing their coaching objectives. Society clearly places great emphasis on winning. However, society also looks to sport as a means to help young and old athletes alike build character and develop leadership skills. The balance is in not evaluating yourself or your athletes on the win-loss record. You - the coach - must resist trying to win (and encouraging your athletes to win) at all costs by placing your athletes first at practice and at competition.

Placing athletes first does not mean that winning is not important. Striving to win within the rules of sport and the competition is an important objective for both athlete and coach. Striving to win is essential for an enjoyable competition. Athletes do not train to lose or perform poorly. The emphasis should not be on winning itself but on striving to win. It is the pursuit of victory, the dream of achieving the goal that matters most.

Coaching Styles

We are now at your second most important decision as a coach - your coaching style. Your coaching style will determine:

- How you decide to teach skills and strategies
- How you organise your practice and competition methods
- How you discipline athletes
- What role you give athletes in making decisions

Coaches lean toward being authoritarian, casual or cooperative. In the past, coaches were more widely accepted as and expected to be authoritarian. In many cases, this is how they were coached and they adopted the same style. Today, athletes are encouraged to ask “why?” Asking why is good because it allows athletes to be co-creators in their athletic experience. The following chart compares the three primary coaching styles.

Coaching (Leadership) Style			
	Authoritarian	Cooperative	Casual
Philosophy	Win centred	Athlete centred	No emphasis
Objectives	Task objectives	Social & task objectives	No objectives
Decision Making	Coach makes all decisions	Decisions are guided by coach, but shared	Athlete makes decisions
Communication Style	Telling	Telling, asking, listening	Listening
Communication Development	Little or none	High	None
What is Winning	Judged by coach	Judged by athlete and coach	Not defined
Athlete Development	Little or no trust in the athlete	Trust in the athlete	Trust not shown
Motivation	Sometimes motivates	Motivates all	No motivation
Training Structures	Inflexible	Flexible	None

Ask yourself “what kind of coach do I want to be?”

As a coach, you want to find a balance in the styles that will allow you to be firm when needed while letting the athletes have fun and also letting them have a voice in their training and competition experiences. The team has to be well organised in order to function effectively and efficiently. The team or the athlete cannot have a vote in every decision that is made. As a coach, you provide the direction and instruction when it is needed and let the athlete make decisions and assume responsibility when appropriate.

Being an athlete is more than simply displaying athletic prowess. Athletes have to be able to cope with pressure, adapt to changing situations, keep winning and losing in perspective, show discipline and maintain concentration in order to perform well. By finding balance within the various coaching styles mentioned, you place trust in the athletes which helps boost their self esteem and motivation. Athletes are not motivated by fear, but by a desire for personal fulfilment. This means that you must be in control of both the athletes and yourself.

Developing a Picture of Your Coaching Style

What are three of the most important characteristics in developing a coaching style?

1. Knowledge of the Sport

There is no substitute for knowing the rules, techniques and strategies in coaching your sport. Lack of knowledge in teaching skills risks injury and frustrates your athletes. Your ability to properly teach and coach the skills of your sport will earn great respect from the athletes. They will value you and the experience. This respect also gives you credibility that you can use in teaching athletes how to behave off the playing field.

2. Motivation

As a coach, you can have all of the skills and knowledge in the world in your sport, however this means nothing if you are not motivated to teach and coach the athletes on all you know. Be motivated enough to take the time with athletes to work with them on learning drills so that they can perform better.

3. Empathy

Empathy is the ability to readily understand your athletes by being aware of their feelings, thoughts and emotions and how they impact the athletes' performance and conveying your sensitivity to them. Make the effort to understand the athletes' joy, frustrations, anxiety and anger.

UNDERSTANDING AND UTILISING SPORT PSYCHOLOGY

Developing Your Communications Skills

There are many aspects of sport psychology, however none will be more important to coaching than learning how to communicate with your athletes and understanding what motivates them to train and compete in sports. By default, successful coaches are good sport psychologists - skilful communicators and motivators.

Coaching is communication. Every act of coaching requires you to communicate. As a coach you must be able to communicate effectively in countless situations.

- Teaching athletes how to do certain skills, run plays
- Talking to an official who you believe has made an incorrect call
- Talking to parents or caregivers about an athlete

Communication is more than a two-way process; it is dimensional. Communication encompasses sending and receiving messages, verbal and nonverbal language and emotions and feelings involved in the content of the message.

- Coaches must be as skilful in receiving messages as they are in giving clear understandable messages. Successful coaches need to be sharp, active listeners so they can understand their athletes.

- It is also essential that coaches be aware of nonverbal communication. It is estimated that over 70 percent of communication is nonverbal. Therefore, coaches must be aware that their athletes are constantly observing and modelling their actions.
- Content is the substance of the message and emotions and feelings pack the content.

The Communication Flow

1. The coach has a thought that he/she wants to tell the athlete.
2. The coach translates the thought into a message.
3. The coach conveys the message – verbally or nonverbally.
4. The athlete receives the message.
5. The athlete interprets the meaning of the message.
6. The athlete responds inwardly and/or outwardly to the message.

Sometimes this flow is smooth and sometimes it is not. It is based on the clarity of the message and the athlete's understanding of the message.

What Makes Communication Ineffective

- The content of the message may not fit the situation
- The message does not adequately communicate your intentions
- The athlete does not receive the message
- The athlete does not understand the message
- The athlete misinterprets the content of the message
- The message itself is inconsistent

Ineffective communication is not about finding fault. Poor communication can be a result of many factors as noted above. Finding where the communication flow stopped is the key to building successful communication between coach and athletes.

Developing Credibility When You Communicate

Your credibility is the single most important element in communicating effectively with athletes. Your credibility is reflected in the trust athletes place in you as a coach. Athletes give you initial credibility because you are the coach. You also have the ability to maintain and build upon this place of trust or to lose it. Once lost, it is tough to get back. How can you build credibility as a coach?

1. Be a balanced coach
2. Know your sport, be willing to learn more and be honest about what you do not know
3. Be reliable, consistent and fair
4. Express empathy, warmth and acceptance of your athletes and where they are in their development

5. Be positive

Learning How to Listen

Statistics show that untrained listeners hear less than 20 percent of a conversation. The majority of us fall within this category. Poor listening skills cause a breakdown in the communication process. If an athlete continually fails in getting you to listen, he/she will simply stop talking with you. Coaches who are poor listeners often have more discipline problems; athletes stop listening to their coach because he/she is not listening to them. Athletes may make a drastic attempt to get you to listen by misbehaving or acting out. Your response to athletes' views and thoughts is important as you begin teaching and training them in their sport.

Improving Your Listening Skills

1. Recognise the need to listen
2. Concentrate on listening by giving your undivided attention to what is being said
3. Search for the meaning behind what is being communicated to you
4. Avoid interrupting athletes as they are talking with you
5. Respond constructively to athletes emotions
6. Respect the rights of athletes to share their views with you. Listen to their fears, joys, problems and accomplishments

Coach as the Model

Your every action as a coach on and off the playing field is a form of nonverbal communication. One of the most important things you communicate by your actions is respect or the lack of it. How you walk, approach others, your gestures and what you say and how you say it convey your attitudes about sportsmanship, other coaches and athletes. Athletes can be highly impressionable, and they hold their coach in high esteem. Your actions can teach athletes much more than sport skills and rules of your sport.

Some Final Thoughts on Communicating

- Emphasise praise and rewards to strengthen desired behaviours
- Positive communication helps athletes value themselves as individuals and as athletes
- Be aware of the emotion expressed in your messages to athletes
- Set realistic goals about athletes' athletic performance abilities as well as their emotional and social behaviour
- Be consistent
- Keep your word
- Be as good as your word.

Positive Reinforcement and Rewards

When used appropriately, reinforcement is one of the primary communication tools of a successful coach. Reinforcement is used to praise an athlete when he/she does well or to

get an athlete to stop undesirable behaviour. Reinforcement is relative and not absolute. For reinforcement to work, a coach must be consistent and systematic in its use. If you are not consistent, your athletes will behave erratically, like the coach. If you are not systematic, you will send confusing messages to your athletes.

Communicating and Correcting Errors

1. **One skill at a time.** Correct only one behaviour or movement at a time.
2. **Ask before giving correction.** Allow the chance to explain what they believe they did. This lets them feel they are a part of the process.
3. **Find the cause.** The cause of an error may be something that you may not see. Again, ask the athlete what they believe they are doing.
4. **Provide constructive instruction.** Avoid too much of “what’s not right” by focusing on “how to do it right.” Always build up the athlete; do not tear them down.
5. **Praise before correction.** Begin with a positive comment about something that the athlete is doing well. Now they are attuned to you. You have gained their attention and trust. Follow up with constructive instruction. Be concise and to the point. Remember to send another message of praise and encouragement.

Using Rewards

Rewarding athletes is not always as easy as it sounds. Below are a few tips on rewarding your athletes.

- Reward the performance, not the outcome
- Reward athletes just as much for their effort as you do for the desired outcome
- Reward little accomplishments on the way to learning an entire skill
- Reward the learning and performance of desired emotional and social skills too
- Reward frequently, especially when new skills are being learned
- Reward as soon as possible when new skills are learned
- Reward an athlete when they have earned it.

Misbehaviour

It is only natural for athletes to misbehave. As a coach, you can respond to an athlete’s misbehaviour with a positive or negative approach. One positive approach is to ignore the bad behaviour. This approach can prove successful in certain situations because punishing the athlete’s misbehaviour encourages them to act out more. Ignoring misbehaviour does not work when the athlete causes danger to himself/herself or other teammates and coaches. In that case, immediate action is necessary. Ignoring misbehaviour is also not successful when the misbehaviour is self-rewarding to the athlete.

You may feel that it is necessary to impose a sanction on an athlete for some aspect of misbehaviour. You should think carefully before doing this and make sure:

- When possible, give a warning before using punishment
- The sanction is appropriate relative to the misbehaviour

- The athlete understands what it is that they have done and why their action was inappropriate
- Make the athlete's parents or carers aware of what has happened so that they can help to reinforce the message, but emphasise that you have dealt with the situation and you don't want them to take further action
- Be consistent
- Once a sanction has been given, do not make the athlete feel like they are still in trouble
- Give sanctions sparingly and only when absolutely necessary.
- Sanctions should never include verbal or physical abuse or the threat of these or anything designed to upset or humiliate the athlete
- Record the details on an Incident Report form and give this to the person within the club responsible for Safeguarding and Welfare

If you feel that the athlete's actions were sufficiently serious to warrant further action with repercussions beyond the current coaching session or competition, you must not take this decision on your own or only with other coaches at the session – you must complete an Incident Report form with a recommendation for further action give this to the person within the club responsible for Safeguarding and Welfare

GOAL SETTING AND MOTIVATION

Developing Self-Confidence through Goal Setting

Realistic yet challenging goals for each athlete are important to the motivation of the athlete both at training and during competition. Accomplishing goals at practice through repetition in settings similar to the competition environment will instill confidence. Sport confidence in athletes helps make participation fun and is critical to the athlete's motivation. Setting goals is a joint effort between athletes and coaches. The main features of goal setting are:

1. Goals need to be structured as short-term, intermediate and long-term
2. Goals need to be viewed as stepping stones to success
3. Goals must be accepted by the athlete
4. Goals need to vary in difficulty— from easily attainable to challenging
5. Goals must be measurable
6. Goals need to be used to establish the athlete's training and competition plan.

Athletes with or without an intellectual disability may be more motivated by accomplishing short-term goals than long-term goals; however, do not be afraid to challenge athletes. Include athletes in setting their personal goals. For example, ask the athlete, "How far do you want to jump today? Let's see how far you jumped at the last practice. What is your personal best? What do YOU think you can do?" Awareness of why the athlete is

participating is also important when setting goals. There are participation factors, which may influence motivation and goal setting:

Age appropriateness	Ability level
Readiness level	Athlete performance
Family influence	Peer influence
Athlete preference	

Performance Goals versus Outcome Goals

Effective goals focus on performance, not outcome. Performance is what the athlete controls. Outcomes are frequently controlled by others. An athlete may have an outstanding performance and not win a contest because other athletes have performed even better. Conversely, an athlete may perform poorly and still win if all other athletes perform at a lower level. If an athlete’s goal is to run 12.10 seconds in the 100m, the athlete has greater control in achieving this goal than winning. However, the athlete has even greater control of achieving a goal if the goal is to run using the correct form, driving the knees through the entire race. This performance goal ultimately gives the athlete more control over his/her performance.

Performance Goal	Outcome Goal
Athletics Run in lane the entire race, completing event	Run race hitting split goals
Basketball Make contact with opponent and block out after the shot	Get the rebound
Football Sprint after balls coming into play	Get to the ball first and control it

Motivation through Goal Setting

Goal setting has proved to be one of the most simple and effective motivational devices developed for sport within the past three decades. While the concept is not new, today the techniques for effective goal setting have been refined and clarified. Motivation is all about having needs and striving to have those needs met. How can you enhance an athlete’s motivation?

1. Provide more time and attention to an athlete when he/she is having difficulty learning a skill.
2. Reward small gains of achievement in skill level
3. Develop other measures of achievement outside of winning
4. Show your athletes that they are important to you
5. Show your athletes that you are proud of them and excited about what they are doing
6. Fill your athletes with self-worth

Goals give direction. They tell us what needs to be accomplished. They increase effort, persistence and the quality of performance. Establishing goals also requires that the athlete and coach determine techniques for how to achieve those goals.

Measurable and Specific

Effective goals are very specific and measurable. Goals stated in the form of “I want to be the best that I can be!” or “I want to improve my performance!” are vague and difficult to measure. It is positive sounding but difficult, if not impossible, to assess whether they have been reached. Measurable goals must establish a baseline of performance recorded during the past one or two weeks for them to be realistic.

Difficult, but Realistic

Effective goals are perceived as challenging, not threatening. A challenging goal is one perceived as difficult but attainable within a reasonable amount of time and with a reasonable amount of effort or ability. A threatening goal is one perceived as being beyond one’s current capacity. Realistic implies that judgment is involved. Goals based upon a baseline of performance recorded during the past one or two weeks are likely to be realistic.

Long- versus Short-Term Goals

Both long and short-term goals provide direction, but short-term goals appear to have the greatest motivational effects. Short-term goals are more readily attainable and are stepping stones to more distant long-term goals. Unrealistic short-term goals are easier to recognise than unrealistic long-term goals. Unrealistic goals can then be modified before valuable practice time has been lost.

Positive versus Negative Goal Setting

Positive goals direct what to do rather than what not to do. Negative goals direct our attention to the errors we wish to avoid or eliminate. Positive goals also require coaches and athletes to decide how they will reach those specific goals. Once the goal is decided, the athlete and coach must determine specific strategies and techniques which allow that goal to be successfully attained.

Set Priorities

Effective goals are limited in number and meaningful to the athlete. Setting a limited number of goals requires that athletes and coaches decide what is important and fundamental for continued development. Establishing a few, carefully selected goals also allow athletes and coaches to keep accurate records without becoming overwhelmed with record keeping.

Mutual Goal Setting

Goal setting becomes an effective motivational device when athletes are committed to achieving those goals. When goals are imposed or established without significant input from the athletes, motivation is unlikely to be enhanced.

Set Specific Time Lines

Target dates provide urgency to an athlete's efforts. Specific target dates tend to eliminate wishful thinking and clarify what goals are realistic and which are not. Timelines are especially valuable in high-risk sports where fear often promotes procrastination in learning new skills.

Formal versus Informal Goal Setting

Some coaches and athletes think that goals must be set in formal meetings outside of practice and require long periods of thoughtful evaluation before they are decided upon. Goals are literally progressions which coaches have been using for years but are now expressed in measurable, performance terms rather than as vague, generalised outcomes.

Team versus Individual Goals

While team goals appear to have great importance for team sports, the reality is that most team goals can be broken down into individual roles or responsibilities. Each player must achieve these individual roles or responsibilities for the team to function effectively.

Goal Setting Domains

When asked to set goals, athletes typically focus on the learning of new skills or performances in competitions. A major role of the coach is to broaden the athlete's perception of those areas, and goal setting can be an effective tool. Goals can be set to enhance fitness, improve attendance, increase intensity, promote sportsmanship, develop team spirit, find more free time, or establish consistency.

Coaching and Teaching Basic Sport Skills

One of the primary roles of the coach is teaching. Teaching means helping athletes learn physical skills and improve their athletic performance. The coach has the responsibility to develop athletes from the beginning stage of learning to becoming skilled athletes. Like all training, the process of learning skills is a long-term process. Teaching techniques is a fundamental skill in successful coaching.

How Athletes Learn

Techniques are the basic building blocks of skilled performance. Techniques are learned skills that allow athletes to compete most efficiently within the rules of sport. Skill has two meanings: a task and/or performance; the observable behaviour that demonstrates a skill. Learning is the relative improvement in performance through practice. Skill learning is an invisible process. Because other factors can impact changes in performance, it is not always easy to know if an athlete has learned a skill. An athlete's consistent performance of a skill is the key to knowing if the skill has been learned.

Motor Programmes

As athletes continue to practice, feedback and instruction are the basic pieces of information used to create a sequence of the athlete's movement (motor programme). The

motor programme is developed whenever we practice a skill. The memory of the previous attempts is used to physically perform the action again. With practice, a clear and precise memory of the skill is formed. The development of an athlete's motor skills is what allows him/her to master a skill. As a coach, one of your major responsibilities is to help athletes develop good motor skills. Many factors impact the learning of motor skills: your coaching ability, the environment, and the athlete's physical and cognitive ability to name a few. Most importantly, your athletes will be influenced greatly by what you do: how you teach, organise practice and give feedback.

Stages of Learning

The **beginning stage** of learning is the thinking stage where the athlete is working out in their mind what to do. As the coach, first you must explain very clearly to athletes the skills they are to learn. It is imperative to be very patient in this stage. The athlete can get easily overwhelmed when they are given too many tasks to learn at one time or if you put a lot of pressure on the athlete too quickly. The stage is complete when the athlete can perform the skill, even though he or she may not perform it perfectly.

The **intermediate stage** is the next level in learning. This stage invokes the motor programme that was started in the beginning stage. The athlete needs to be motivated and given feedback on their skill development. The emphasis is now on the quality of practice to refine skills including timing and coordination. They need to know what they are doing incorrectly and how they can make corrections. Feedback is vitally important at this stage. As the skill becomes more automatic, the athlete has entered the advanced stage.

The **advanced stage** is when the athlete is performing the skill. The control of the movement becomes more automatic. The athlete is not thinking about the movement as much. The athlete can now focus on more critical skills and applying strategy of the new skill to their sport. It is important to note that improvement in this area is smaller and may require more motivation for the athlete to practice.

Learning Models

There is more to coaching than knowing sport specific skills. Successful coaches must properly teach skills and mentally prepare athletes for competition. Regardless of physical, mental, social and emotional well-being, all students learn differently. Coaches must be aware of the learning process in order to create an improved learning experience for athletes. Coaches must honour the athletes learning style; sensory mode and reasons for participation when assessing and selecting athletes' levels of competition.

Athletes may tend to process information visually, auditorily, kinaesthetically or in a combination of all three and coaches must take notice of how an athlete processes the information he or she receives. After you have identified how an athlete processes information, it is your job to set goals for athletes that will allow opportunity to maximise participation and potential.

Teaching Skills

There are two basic types of skills: simple and complex. Learning simple skills typically require little practice. However, they are only considered simple if the athlete can learn them quickly. What is simple for one athlete may not be as simple for another.

Simple skills are most easily mastered from seeing them performed. It is generally considered that 80 percent of learning takes place through what is seen. The basic methods in teaching simple skills are imitation and demonstration. Basically, athletes copy what you show them and then give them positive feedback.

Complex skills require a little more effort on the part of the coach. First, learn to break down complex skills into smaller tasks to assist athletes in learning the skill.

Levels of Instruction

Regardless of the type of skill, the basic levels of instruction are verbal, demonstration, physical prompting and physical assistance. Athletes may require a single method or a combination of these methods to learn a sport skill. It is important to identify the methods that work best for your individual athletes.

Verbal instruction is the most common form of teaching and should be used first when presenting new skills. Be conscious of presenting the task in one or two-part directions. All language should be clear and consistent throughout the lesson using simple key words

Demonstration is a level of teaching that is universal and can be used by the coach to assist with the verbal instruction of a skill. When a skill becomes too difficult for the athlete to verbally comprehend, demonstration should be used.

Physical prompting is best used when verbal and demonstration methods are not working. Guidance by touch to prompt an athlete into proper position is an example of a physical prompt.

Physical assistance is used when all other levels of instruction have been exhausted. This level requires the coach to physically move the athlete into position and to physically assist the athlete to complete the skill. This method should be used with caution, especially if the athlete functions at a lower level and/or does not like to be touched.

Generally you should teach sports skills by

1. Briefly explain the skill
2. Break the skills into smaller, simpler steps so that the athlete can be successful
3. Briefly demonstrate the skill
4. Let the athletes practice the simpler skills
5. Gradually combine steps so that the entire skill is shaped into the desired performance.

Watch athletes carefully during practice so that you can provide positive feedback and reinforcement. Allow athletes to continue practicing once you have given feedback and corrected errors. It is important to make sure that athletes complete the practice feeling successful and good about themselves.

Expanding Your Coaching Knowledge

The laws of physics may not change; however, the ways you present the basic skill preferences will change from minute to minute, athlete to athlete. A coach must be able to simplify instruction components into short and concise phrases. Explanation, demonstration and application of a particular skill may be presented in many different ways. Expand your coaching knowledge to gain the confidence and information you need to establish a positive, fun learning environment and experience for athletes, assistant coaches and families.