



Unified Sports

Handbook

Special Olympics
Great Britain



Unified Sports® Handbook

This resource includes all the information you will need to start and maintain a successful Unified Sports programme within your club. For more information, advice and support, contact Jason Cornwell, Programme Development Manager at Special Olympics Great Britain on +44 (0) 20 7247 8891.

Contents

What are Unified Sports?	3
Why get involved in Unified Sports?	4
Benefits to the athlete	5
Benefits to the unified partner	6
Benefits to families	7
Benefits to the coach	7
Developing an inclusive culture	7
Unified Sports – Player pathway	8
Social – entry phase	8
Athlete development – development phase	8
Competition – exit phase	9
How do you get involved in Unified Sports?	10
1. The principle of meaningful involvement	10
2. The selection of appropriate sport(s)	10
3. Qualified coaches lead the programme	10
4. Selection of appropriate teammates	11
5. Quality regular training leading to competition	12
6. Unified Sports rules are followed	16
7. Commitment of support	16
Case studies	17
The accreditation process	19
Further reading	20

What are Unified Sports?

“Sport, including disability sport, will continue to evolve and become more inclusive.” DePauw, K. & Gavron, S.J. (2005)

The value of sport extends beyond its physical challenges, health benefits or competitive expression; it is known to hold an integral social value with the potential to bring together different groups, dispel stigmatising myths and promote community cohesion. In 2007 the European Commission highlighted the importance of sport as a vehicle for generating a shared sense of belonging and participation and as a valuable tool in the development of social inclusion.

Promoting the health and social participation of all people with intellectual disabilities is important as they are particularly vulnerable to encountering difficulties in those areas. Integration of these individuals into inclusive sports sessions is a strategy to address this issue.

The concept of combining people with and without intellectual disabilities on the same team was first introduced in the United States in the mid-1980s to provide another level of challenge for higher ability Special Olympics athletes and to promote equality and inclusion. Today the initiative includes virtually all Special Olympics team sports. Unified Sports competitions are an important part of Special Olympics World Games, as well as local, regional and national Games.



Special Olympics Unified Sports promotes inclusion through bringing together people with intellectual disabilities (known as athletes) and people without (known as unified partners), to train and compete on the same teams and in the same competitions. Unified Sports participants can improve their physical fitness, sharpen their skills, challenge themselves through competition and have fun whilst participating in a variety of sports, ranging from football to basketball to tennis.

Why get involved in Unified Sports?

Benefits to the athlete

Taking part in Unified Sports enables athletes to develop their personal and life skills alongside sporting skills. This enables them to access places that they would normally be excluded from and / or feel that they cannot access. It also helps them to develop relationships with other athletes and unified partners, essentially providing the opportunity for friendship and building self-confidence.

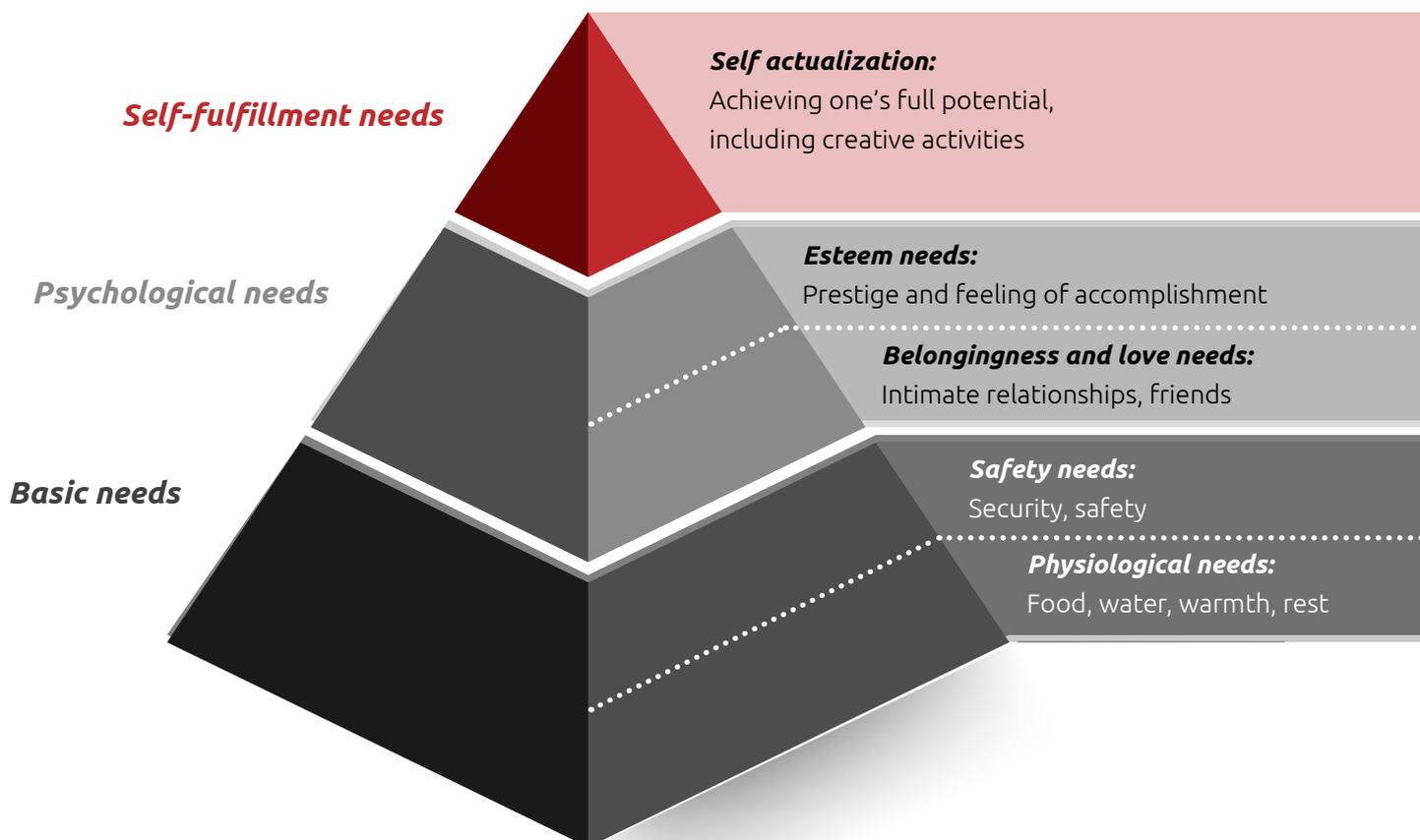
Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (figure 1) demonstrates how Unified Sports can play an important part in aiding an athlete to achieve self-actualization and in some cases their fulfilment in life.

By participating in Unified Sports athletes gain improved knowledge and experience of the importance of a healthy balanced diet, the need for water, warmth and good levels of rest.

Unified Sports provide the athlete with a safe and secure environment to participate in sport.

Through participation in Unified Sports the athlete learns how to develop and maintain friendships and build rapport with coaches, athletes and unified partners.

Research conducted by Special Olympics International shows that Unified Sports provide participants with a feeling of accomplishment and prestige that in turn aids and develops good self-esteem. Self-actualization for a participant can be achieved by competing in Unified Sports competition or simply by just training in a Unified Sports team.



Unified Sports enables athletes to:

- Learn new sports
- Develop higher-level sports skills
- Have new competition experiences
- Experience meaningful inclusion as each athlete is assured of playing a valued role on the team
- Socialise with peers and make new friends (the programme provides a forum for positive social interaction between teammates and often leads to long-lasting friendships)
- Participate in their communities and have choices outside of Special Olympics (Unified Sports programmes are often initiated by community partners, including parks and recreation organisations, schools, colleges, sports clubs and community sports organisations. These partnerships help further include athletes into their wider communities)



.....
Yes, I believe in myself, I worked hard to be a part of the team and now I believe if I work hard I can achieve many things that I want.” Special Olympics athlete
.....

Self-actualization should be accessible to all involved in sport. In reality this is not always possible for people with intellectual disabilities; however Special Olympics Unified Sports provide the opportunities. During research, athletes specifically stated they derived fun, improved sport skills, friendship, and improved communication skills from their participation in Unified Sports. A number of athletes particularly remark on how they enjoy the fact that they are trusted members of the team who can be relied upon to deliver good performances during matches. This is a position which is new to many athletes who typically rely on others for support in many aspects of their daily lives. To be able to assume a position of trust and have others hold expectations of them is both a confidence boost and a new capability developed through being part of a Unified Sports team.

Benefits to the unified partner

During research, unified partners stated they enjoyed themselves, improved their sport skills, developed friendships, gained higher self-esteem, had greater community involvement and learned life lessons during their participation in Unified Sports. They also noted that their involvement in Unified Sports was so much more than just a sporting experience. Many said that they had learnt new skills which would be important throughout their lives, such as listening to others, understanding differences, not judging through stereotypes and seeing the world from other people's perspectives.

Unified partners identified the opportunity to mix with and get to know people with intellectual disabilities as being of central importance in their experience of Unified Sports. Many said that getting to know people personally had a positive influence on their attitude toward those with intellectual disabilities.

In order to achieve this balance, it is important to note that unified partners are not there merely to support or assist the athletes; rather that Unified Sports provides mutual support to all its participants.

Benefits to families

Families of Unified Sports athletes report the positive influence the Unified Sports programme has on family life. The athlete develops and improves their confidence and social skills, which allows the family to be more engaged with one another. Parents and / or Carers are also able to take on an active role in the programme through volunteering; this allowed them to be involved in the activities of their athlete.

Families of unified partners feel that Unified Sports have benefitted their son/daughter as they progressed through their education or looked for jobs. Family members talk of the positive impact Unified Sports have on their children, in terms of their attitudes to people with intellectual disabilities. In relation to their children developing maturity, parents noted that this was aided by the responsibilities and position they held within a Unified Sports team.

Unified Sports also provides a platform for families to come together and exchange thoughts and experiences with others.

Benefits to the coach

Coaching people with different abilities and goals makes the Coach's role a lot more interesting and challenging. Unified Sports brings together a great variety of people, so developing Coaching skills that enable sessions and communication methods to be adapted to suit everyone, helps to develop Coaches' abilities even further.



Developing an inclusive culture

Unified Sports is a continuous programme with no specific end-point. It enables the development of strong long-term bonds amongst athletes, unified partners and Coaches. Unified Sports allow for people with and without intellectual disabilities to experience each other's capabilities, build friendships, and promote the inclusion of all persons in the arena of sport.

Unified Sports' strength lies in its ability to build social inclusion and social capital. Social inclusion refers to an individual's feeling of belonging within their community or group. This is closely intertwined with the concept of social capital, which refers to the networks, norms, and trusts that link an individual to a community. Unified Sports builds both social capital and social inclusion by empowering people with intellectual disabilities to be present in the community, participate in that community through sport, and build relationships and friendships with others. By creating an opportunity for people with intellectual disabilities to have a meaningful and equal presence, both physically and socially, Unified Sports breaks down barriers and provides access to community life.

Unified Sports – Player pathway



Social

Generate Athletes social engagement away from the sporting environment



Athlete Development

A tool to develop Athletes sporting skills



Competition

Generate more inclusive competition

Social – entry phase

The first step on the Unified Sports player pathway aims to generate social engagement away from the sports environment. Groups are advised to encourage all athletes regardless of ability to engage in social Unified Sports activity as this is a great way for participants to develop social life skills and further breakdown any negative conception of people with an intellectual disability.

Athlete development – development phase

The second step on the Unified Sports player pathway aims to use Unified Sports as a vehicle for sports related skills development for athletes. Again, groups are advised to encourage all athletes regardless of ability to engage in Unified Sports activity. However, Coaches and volunteers need to be sensible in their management of the sessions / environment.



Coaches are advised to run parallel activities, splitting the group based on ability levels. Each ability group should have equal numbers of athletes and unified partners of similar ability and each group would take part in similar activities / practices. For example if the session is dribbling a football, one group would dribble in and out of cones and the other group would simply dribble in a straight line.

Coaches should use the idea of parallel activities to develop skill and where possible move athletes into the most relevant ability group.

Competition – exit phase

The final step on the Unified Sports player pathway aims to generate social engagement away from the sports environment and develop further skills through competition. Teams of similar ability with equal ratio of athlete and unified partners compete in meaningful competitive sport. Athletes and unified partners should be encouraged through sport to develop relationships away from the field of play, i.e. team building activities. All team members should play to a similar ability level, using the same rules and should not be given additional responsibilities such as coaching or volunteering whilst competing in Unified Sports.

Competitions should still be Divisoned as per the Special Olympics competition guidelines to ensure that competing teams and their members, enjoy meaningful competition. This ensures that all athletes and unified partners taking part, experience true competition and are able to fully commit to competition without the need to be treated differently because of their disability.

At this stage, all athletes and unified partners taking part in any Special Olympics sanctioned competition at any level (local to international) must be registered through the Special Olympics Athlete Membership scheme (SAM). Please contact Special Olympics GB Head Office for more information.

Competition pathways do exist for Unified Sports up to International levels, however this does vary from sport to sport. You can find the contact details of your nearest Unified Sports Club by searching our website in the “Find a Club” section.

Guidelines for a Successful Unified Sports Competition can be found by clicking here.

A comparison table between the Unified Sports Athlete Development and Competition phases can be found by [clicking here](#).

http://resources.specialolympics.org/uploadedFiles/special-olympics-resources/Topics/Unified_Sports/Files/4.3-Comparison_Comp%20UnifSp-PIDev_09-03-12.pdf



How do you get involved in Unified Sports?

1. The principle of meaningful involvement

This is the most critical determinant of success and the Coach and all of the players must follow it. Fundamentally, the principle of meaningful involvement ensures that every player is given an opportunity to contribute to the success of his or her team through their unique skills and qualities.

This means that every teammate:

- Demonstrates sufficient sport specific skills and game understanding
- Plays a valued role on the team that emphasizes his or her personal talents
- Has an opportunity to play without a heightened risk of injury



2. The selection of appropriate sport(s)

A variety of factors influence the determination of which sport is chosen for Unified Sports training and competition. Some of these factors include athlete and unified partner interest, age and ability levels of potential athletes and unified partners, available facilities and equipment, availability of qualified coaches, finances and opportunities for competition. Unified Sports are only for sports where there is an opportunity to train and compete alongside teammates, and not as an individual.

3. Qualified coaches lead the programme

Unified Sports teams should be organized under the guidance of a trained coach who understands and adopts the principles of Special Olympics Unified Sports, and has knowledge of the rules, techniques, strategies and training methods of the selected sport.

The Unified Sport Coaching Guidelines can be found by clicking here.

http://resources.specialolympics.org/uploadedFiles/special-olympics-resources/Topics/Unified_Sports/Files/4.11-Unified%20Sports%20Coach%20Guidelines_9-12-12.pdf

Special Olympics sport specific rules and resources can be found by clicking here.

<http://www.specialolympics.org/sports.aspx>

4. Selection of appropriate teammates

It is fundamental to the Special Olympics experience that each participant on a team has the ability and opportunity to contribute to the team's success and embraces the principle of meaningful involvement. Team members should have the necessary skills to participate on a Unified Sports team without causing undue risk of injury to themselves or others. Additionally, team members should be matched by age and ability as specifically defined by the sport, to avoid certain players feeling left out or unneeded.

All players on a Unified Sports team make the commitment to attend every coaching session, support each other as equal teammates, and demonstrate respect and sportsmanship.

The Unified Sports Teammate Guidelines can be found by clicking here.

http://resources.specialolympics.org/uploadedFiles/special-olympics-resources/Topics/Unified_Sports/Files/4.11-UnifSp%20Teammate%20Guidelines_09%2012%2012.pdf

Getting athletes and unified partners together

Most Unified Sports teams are formed in one of four primary ways:

- Family / Friends: Identifying a group of appropriate level Special Olympics athletes and asking their families, friends and acquaintances to participate as unified partners
- School: Identifying school programmes headed by a teacher or Coach who proceeds to recruit students (athletes and unified partners) within the school to participate
- Universities / Colleges: Identifying programmes of study in physical education, coaching, recreation or special education and offer Unified Sports participation as an avenue for service learning, field experience or volunteer opportunities
- Community: Identifying individuals playing on community-based recreational / corporate leagues and asking them to participate on a Unified Sports team





Assessing ability

Before any player is placed on a Unified Sports team, it is critical to utilise a procedure for screening, conducting basic skills testing and evaluating game play for all players. Obtaining these results ensures that athletes and unified partners are appropriate and reasonably well matched for a Unified Sports programme.

“Friendship is the most important thing about being a member of a Unified team. We are all friends both on and off the field.”

- *Special Olympics unified partner*

Player assessment is made up of two components: objective sports specific skills assessment tests and a subjective game play assessment. While it might be said that it is performance in a game that is the only meaningful assessment criteria, use of additional objective skills tests help improve the process in a number of ways:

- Objective tests are useful to verify subjective assessments
- Objective tests provide a measurable indicator for Special Olympics athletes who wish to move from traditional Special Olympics sports to Unified Sports
- Objective tests also serve to provide data for pre-classifying teams for Unified Sports competitions as per the stages in the Unified Sports Player Pathway

A detailed document outlining all the steps in the Unified Sports team assessment and selection process can be found by clicking here.

http://resources.specialolympics.org/uploadedFiles/special-olympics-resources/Topics/Unified_Sports/Files/4.10-Assessing-Forming%20Teams_no%20pix_9-16-12.pdf

5. Quality regular training leading to competition

Unified Sports teams should have a minimum of ten weeks of training (including competition) before entering into a competition against other clubs. This enables the team to bond and create relationships before placing them into the possible stressful environment of competition.



Practical coaching advice

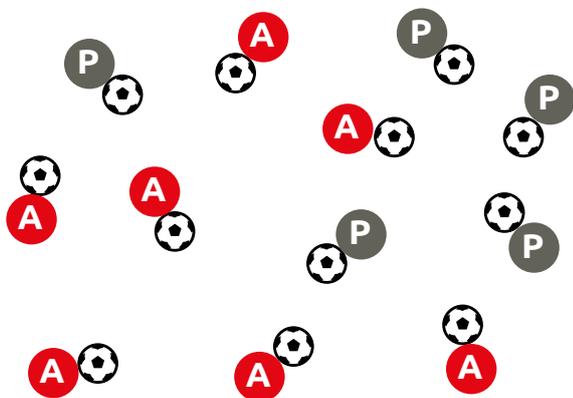
- Space** Coaches are advised to play around with the size of grids or height, distance of equipment to make activities easier or harder. Coaches can also implement zones to assist in matching players with similar ability.
- Task** Coaches are advised to manipulate the task of the session to challenge individuals based on their ability.
- Equipment** Coaches are encouraged to use a variety of equipment to change the difficulty of a task / session.
- People** Coaches are advised to change the number of players in a practice and / or change the role of players within practices.
- Speed** Coaches are encouraged to vary the speed of sessions / practices to challenge different groups.



There are several ways of including players of different abilities within a session. Most commonly this is done by using the 'Inclusion Spectrum', which consists of Open, Parallel, Modified and Specific sessions. This document focuses on 'Open' and 'Parallel'.

Open practice

An open practice enables all participants to participate fully in the session regardless of their ability. The following uses football as an example, but can be easily adapted to other sports:



Each participant is given a ball to dribble around the designated playing area.

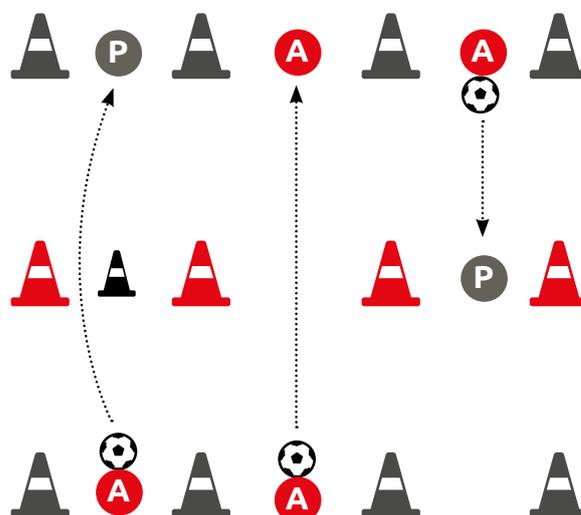
The playing area is dictated by the number of participants and their playing ability.

In this practice each participant should be challenged to progress based on their own ability.

Progressions could consist of performing a skill or some football related movement.

Parallel practice

A parallel session enables everyone to take part in the same topic or theme but within a group that challenges them appropriately. The following uses football as an example, but can be easily adapted to other sports:



In pairs, groups are challenged based on their ability level.

Each group performs a similar practice, with slight progressions made to challenge individuals.

Group 1: Short Passing around the red cone.

Group 2: Short Passing over 20m

Group 3: Short Passing over 10m

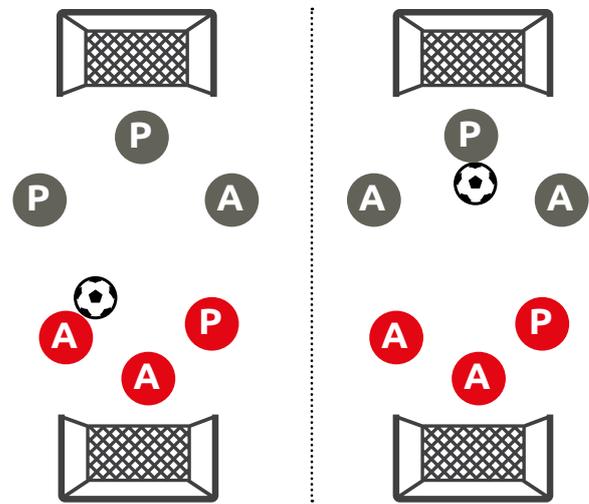


Open / Parallel practice

Opportunities to take part in local competitions are critical to the success of a Unified Sports team.

Participation in local competitions should lead to entry into higher levels of competitions.

Guidelines for a Successful Unified Sports Competition can be found by clicking [here](#).



In this practice you can see two 3v3 matches being played alongside each other.

Both groups are open practices as everyone in the group is able to participate fully.

Using a parallel practice we are able to have two groups playing at varying levels of the game.

6. Unified Sports rules are followed

All Unified Sports competitions should be conducted according to Official Special Olympics Sports Rules, including placement of Unified Sports teams in appropriate age and ability divisions. Special Olympics sport specific rules and resources can be found by clicking [here](#). In general, teams should be evenly split between athletes and unified partners, all teammates should use the same rules and be of similar playing ability.



7. Commitment of support

Four levels of support are critical to start and sustain the Unified Sports programme:

- The National Programme provides funding (where possible) for training of coaches and national competition management
- The Club Programme is responsible for training athletes and unified partners, hosting and attending local and regional competitions, securing facilities, equipment, suitable coaches and sports kit
- Coaches are responsible for gaining knowledge, training and coaching athletes and unified partners and ensuring that they have frequent opportunities to compete

The Spectator provides acknowledgement, engagement and acceptance. Having fans in the stands can be crucial to the motivation of a team, especially a Unified Sports team



Case studies

Special Olympics East Herts (SOEH) Eastern Region - Unified Basketball

Originally set up as a specific intellectual disability basketball team, SOEH felt it was necessary to grow their Unified Sports programme and decided to adapt its sessions to accommodate both types of playing opportunity (Unified and traditional). SOEH are currently supporting Special Olympics St. Albans in developing its own Unified basketball team.

“At Special Olympics East Hertfordshire Basketball we have started to integrate Unified games at the end of our training sessions. I am seeing a positive impact on our players. It has increased the speed of the game, giving players a better understanding of positioning and off-the-ball play. Unified basketball is something that I am hoping we can take part in competitively.” Simon Turner, Basketball Coach.



Care Management Group (CMG) Fitness4Fun South East Region Unified Football

During 2010, Care Management Group (CMG) helped a group of their service users to engage in football by setting up their own football sessions on a weekly basis at a local playing field. They then developed a team to compete against other CMG residents in Wales. Following this successful activity CMG started to recruit unified partners from their services that support people with mental health. CMG Fitness4Fun now regularly compete in Unified football.



Special Olympics East Herts (SOEH) Eastern Region - Unified Netball

Through the support of Tottenham Hotspur Foundation and England Netball, the club has been able to access the 'Back to Netball' programme as an additional Unified playing opportunity. This simply brings together two different groups of people to play Netball.

“Supporting SOEH to access the ‘Back to Netball’ project gave me huge satisfaction and it also had a positive impact on the participants. It has been great to experience Unified Netball and see how the model of inclusion can work with future England Netball projects.”
Sophie Johnson, England Netball Development Officer



Special Olympics East Herts (SOEH) Eastern Region - Unified Tennis

Through the support of Tottenham Hotspur Foundation and the Tennis Foundation a relationship between SOEH and Gosling Tennis Centre was formed. Gosling Tennis Centre, which currently has a pan-disability tennis development centre, embraced the idea of Unified Sports and welcomed athletes and unified partners from SOEH to join their programme. Tennis students from their development centre also engaged in the Unified programme.

“Unified tennis has been a fantastic addition to our programme as it has started to link all areas of our programmes together and it has seen a great level of teamship and friendships form. All players have improved in the sessions and this was shown in a recent tournament which was very well attended and very competitive.” Phillip Martin, Head Coach, Gosling Tennis Centre



Care Management Group (CMG)

Fitness4Fun

South East Region

Unified Netball

Some keen members of staff at CMG became aware of the CMG football programme and wanted to support female service users of CMG to take part in more formalised sport. As keen netballers, they have set up a social Unified netball group who get together regularly to play games against each other. Over time the plan is for them to become more formal and play regular games against Special Olympics East Hertfordshire, who are in a similar position.

Maria Walker

Eastern Region

Special Olympics East Hertfordshire

Joined Special Olympics in 2011

Maria Walker is a care home manager in the Broxbourne area of Hertfordshire. Maria combines her love for sports with her passion for work with people with learning disabilities.

Maria got involved in Special Olympics East Hertfordshire by establishing her own Unified Football team back in the summer of 2011, a year later she had organised football opportunities for the female residents of her home and had started to develop multi-sport opportunities within Special Olympics East Herts.

Each week Maria volunteers hours of her time to develop Unified Sports opportunities for residents of her home and in addition to her day job Maria liaises with athletes, families and coaches to ensure that all know what is happening with Special Olympics East Hertfordshire Unified Sports sessions and events.

Maria now sees more confidence and social skills in her athletes and a greater appreciation of the athletes by the unified partners.

The accreditation process

Clubs wanting to develop their own Unified Sports programme need to be accredited with Special Olympics GB in order to benefit from the various competition pathways on offer, and to receive training, news, funding and development updates.

If your Club is already accredited to Special Olympics GB, please refer to the Club Programme Handbook for more information (available from Special Olympics Head Office or on the website). Contact Special Olympics GB Head Office if you require more information, including SAM forms.

Please remember that both athletes and unified partners must be registered with Special Olympics GB in order to take part in Special Olympics GB sanctioned events, and to be covered by our insurance.

To accredit your Club to Special Olympics GB, please email info@sogb.org.uk, or call +44 (0) 207 247 8891. You will be assigned a staff member from the Sports and Development Department, who will support you and your club through the whole accreditation process.

The website also has further resources – www.specialolympicsgb.org.uk.

Further reading

Dowling S, Menke S, McConkey R, & Hassan D (2012). Sport and disability. *Managing Sport: Social and Cultural Perspectives*.

Hassan D, Dowling S, McConkey R, & Menke S (2012). The inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities in team sports: lessons from the Youth Unified Sports programme of Special Olympics.

McConkey R, Dowling S, Hassan D, & Menke S (2012). Promoting social inclusion through Unified Sports for youth with intellectual disabilities: a five-nation study. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*.

Wilski M, Nadolska A, Dowling S, McConkey R, & Hassan D (2012). Personal development of participants in Special Olympics unified sports teams.

Kai H (2010). Effect of College Students Acting as Special Olympic Unified Sports Partners on the Merge of Special Education and Higher Education.

Dowling S, McConkey R, Hassan D, and Menke S (2010), 'Unified gives us a chance': An evaluation of Special Olympics Unified Sports Programme in Europe/Eurasia.

Roswal G M (2007). Special Olympics Unified Sports: Providing a transition to mainstream sports.

Townsend M, & Hassall J (2007). Mainstream students' attitudes to possible inclusion in unified sports with students who have an intellectual disability.

This resource has been developed in partnership between

Special Olympics
Great Britain



Coca-Cola Great Britain

nationalgrid

For more information please contact:

Special Olympics Great Britain
Corinthian House
1st Floor
6-8 Great Eastern Street
London
EC2A 3NT

Email: info@sogb.org.uk

Web: www.specialolympicsgb.org.uk

Follow us on:

-  @SOGreatBritain
-  SpecialOlympicsGB

Support the work of Special Olympics and help us to transform lives:
Registered as a Charity in accordance with the Charities Act 1960 No: 800329