

An Introduction to Competition

Providing competition is an essential service that Special Olympics provides for its athletes/unified partners. All Special Olympics GB clubs/regions should provide at least one competition opportunity per season/year in each sport that they have a coaching programme in. This is an absolute minimum but ideally each athlete/unified partner should be able to compete several times during the course of a season/year.

The principles of Special Olympics competition can be found in [Article 1 of the Special Olympics Sports Rules](#).

Fundamentals

The main difference between Special Olympics and competition from most other sports organisations is that Special Olympics competition is 'banded' (by a process called divisioning¹). This means that individuals are put into a group to compete against other individuals of a similar ability for their own set of awards (1st-8th place).

Many Special Olympics sports have events which are intended to offer competition opportunities for athletes of lower ability. All Special Olympics competitions should offer a range of events so that athletes of all ability levels can take part.

Goals of Competition

There are many reasons why competition is important. Principally it provides athletes/unified partners with opportunities for achievement and to receive a tangible reward for their efforts. It also provides an incentive to keep training and for coaches, volunteers, family members and sponsors to continue their involvement with Special Olympics.

Event Managers should set themselves the objective of providing a **well organised** event of the highest possible **quality** and a **consistent standard** (venue, rules, equipment and volunteers) across all Special Olympics GB sports.

Competitor Choice

All Special Olympics athletes/unified partners in regular training should be encouraged to compete. However it is recognised that some may enjoy participating in coaching sessions but may not wish to compete – this is their choice and it should be respected.

Advancement²

By participating in competition, athletes/unified partners earn the right to be considered for advancement to higher levels of competition within Special Olympics – e.g. an athlete that competes at a local competition may then advance to a regional competition and so on.

In accordance with the Special Olympics philosophy of providing opportunities for athletes of all abilities, the selection of individuals or teams to advance at the next higher level of competition is not based on ability – all eligible athletes/unified partners should be considered.

¹ The procedures for divisioning can be found in [Article 1 of the Special Olympics Sports Rules \(Section I\)](#) but there is also an explanatory [video](#) available to watch as well.

² See the [Competition Advancement Pathway](#).

There are two Special Olympics GB policies that apply when considering athletes for advancement:

Coaching Requirement

Athletes/unified partners must have been following a supervised training programme in the relevant sport for a minimum of 8 weeks prior to a local competition. They must then have been following a supervised training programme in the relevant sport for a minimum of a further 26 weeks prior to a regional or a super-regional competition. They must then have been following a supervised training programme in the relevant sport for a minimum of a further 26 weeks prior to a national competition.³

SAM Registration

Athletes/unified partners must be SAM registered to compete at all levels of Special Olympics competition. Non-SAM registered individuals can be invited to local/regional competitions, but note that these individuals can only compete as a 'guest' on **one competitive** occasion. This process can be used to encourage individuals to become SAM registered however, all participating athletes must meet the [Special Olympics GB eligibility criteria](#) i.e. they must have an intellectual disability and not a learning difficulty or another impairment. For Special Olympics GB national competitions and above, all competitors must be SAM registered.

Awards

For Special Olympics competitions, [Article 1 of the Special Olympics Sports Rules \(Section K\)](#) specifically states that medals should be presented to those coming 1st, 2nd and 3rd and that ribbons should be presented to those who finish in 4th – 8th position.⁴

There are specific instances where awards do not have to be given to competing athletes. This would include, for instance, a come and try event, a training event or an informal competition such as a friendly football match between two Special Olympics clubs.

PR

Competition provides great opportunities to positively raise the profile of Special Olympics locally and highlight the abilities of individuals with an intellectual disability so don't forget to invite the local press and use social media appropriately too.

³ Unless there has been no competition at the lower level for the athlete to enter.

⁴ Special Olympics GB understands that presenting ribbons for 4th to 8th place is not always feasible and so it will sanction local/regional events that plan to use a suitable alternative such as a certificate.