



Principle of Meaningful Involvement

The most important one of the “7 Criteria for the Success of a Special Olympics Unified Sports Program” is the **principle of meaningful involvement**. *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: (a) demonstrates sufficient sport-specific skills and game understanding; (b) plays a valued role on the team that emphasizes his or her personal talents; and (c) has an opportunity to play without a heightened risk of injury.

All team members must be engaged and provide their own individual abilities and strengths. In so doing, athletes and partners may have different perspectives. The athletes on the team may not be accustomed to the experience of having their contributions accepted and respected. In addition, partners may need to be encouraged to play to their own personal bests while being a good teammate to others.

Consequently, when Unified Sports teams are created, it is extremely important that both athletes and partners are assessed as to their abilities and game play. While there could be noticeable differences in their skills, the coach will be able to observe their overall performance to determine if they have the requisite skills and understanding to safely participate on this team. The goal is that every teammate should play a meaningful role and have the opportunity to contribute his or her strengths to their Unified Sports team. There should be a quality of social interaction and communication among teammates that allows everyone to participate fully and enjoy a positive experience.

Indicators of Meaningful Involvement

- Teammates compete without causing undue risk of injury to themselves or others.
- Teammates participate according to the rules of competition.
- Teammates have the ability and opportunity to contribute to the performance of the team.
- Teammates adjust their skills according to those of other players, resulting in improved performance by team members with lesser ability.

Meaningful involvement is **not achieved** when certain team members ...

- Display superior sports skills without involving their teammates.
- Serve predominantly as on-field coaches rather than teammates or mentors.
- Control most aspects of the game, especially during the most critical periods.
- Do not train or practice regularly and only show up on the day of competition.
- Lower their level of ability dramatically so that they do not hurt others or control the entire game.

Note: It is important that all coaches and program leaders understand the Principle of Meaningful Involvement prior to the selection of team members.

As you can see, Unified Sports further meets the mission of Special Olympics and embraces the philosophy and principles of Special Olympics Unified Sports.

“I don’t see many differences. Athletes and partners both want to compete. And everyone wants to have fun.” – Don Hess, Unified Sports coach