



Unit 2: Teaching and Training the Athlete

To maximize time, it is vital that written plans and programs be developed. They are necessary to chart developments and to keep on target. In addition, they are necessary for the center or school or in the unlikely event of an accident.

There are a variety of levels of instruction and assistance that can be provided to athletes to facilitate learning, skill development, and competition success. Each coach needs to address each athlete individually.

Organizing a Training Program

- **Assessment of athletes' level of fitness and skills**

- Appropriate sport selection
- Appropriate goals
- Means of following progress of athlete and training program - record
- Examples of assessment tests

- **Goal setting and seasonal planning**

- Goals: readily attainable, short-term, concrete, and individual
- Athlete involvement in individual and team goal setting
- Goals incorporated into a preliminary "Season Plan"

- **Planning a training session**

- Medical information on each athlete at every practice
- Effective use of limited time; planning and prioritizing
- Components: warm-up and stretching, skills instruction, competition experience, and cool-down
- Familiar and comfortable training "routine"

Conducting a Training Session

There are many ways to conduct a training session for Special Olympics athletes. Because of comprehension and memory challenges for the athlete, there is considerable value in a developing a consistent training "routine" that provides familiarity, stability, and comfort.

There are four essential components of a typical training session: warm-up and stretching, skills instruction, competition experience, and cool-down and stretching. (Fitness training or conditioning can also be included following competition experience and prior to cool-down.) The following techniques and tips will provide the most successful learning opportunities.

1. Warm-up and Stretching

- Time is precious and skills repetition vital. Warm up in a way specific to the sport. For example in soccer, dribble a ball while jogging as opposed to just running.
- When athletes have difficulties with balance, use stretching activities that can be done while sitting, lying down, or leaning against a wall or partner.
- Involve athletes in leading the exercises; coaches are then free to circulate and directly assist others who need help. The coaches must insure that each athlete is performing the warm-up and stretching activities correctly so that injuries are prevented.
- Teach a simple routine involving the major muscle groups, which athletes can repeat at home and at competition. Warm-up by walking or jogging 5 minutes. Then perform the following stretches: 1) calf stretch against wall, 2) hamstring stretch or toe touch, 3) quad stretch holding onto wall for balance (both directions), 4) groin stretch while sitting or lunging to each side, 5)

shoulder stretch (grasping hands behind body and leaning forward, and 6) triceps stretch (reaching to sky with one arm, bending elbow which points forward, and pulling elbow straight back with opposite hand; performing stretch with other arm).



- For stretching, what to do and not to do:

Do	Do Not
Perform warm-up activity for 5 minutes (walk or run slowly).	Do not begin practice by stretching or playing; can tear muscle fibers.
Perform held stretches for 10-30 seconds each.	Do not bounce when stretching; can also tear muscle fibers.
Start with the large muscle groups such as the legs then move to the shoulders, etc.	Do not start with the smaller muscles. Go from large to small.
Perform each stretch to the point of tension.	Do not put strain on the joints, back or neck.
Breathe while stretching.	Do not hold breath.
Perform stretches in a "safe" position and through range of motion.	Avoid the hurdler's stretch, deep knee bends, straight-leg sit-ups, sit-ups pulling on the neck, and lying on the back and moving legs overhead as if riding a bicycle.

2. Skills Instruction

Training Sequence (tasks → skills → application in game/event → implementation in competition)

- The key is to break down skills into small tasks or steps; tasks are then put together to form skills. *(Addresses difficulty in performing multi-step tasks)*
 - Drills are developed so that skills can be applied in a game or an event situation. The result is skills applied and performed in competition.

COMMUNICATION WHEN TEACHING AND COACHING

- Communicate effectively.
 - **Be clear:** Use words that an athlete can understand or that an athlete has a point of reference such as "see the ball" as opposed to "find the target". *(Addresses an athlete's need to understand what he or she is asked to do)*
 - **Be concrete:** Use words that are specific to something physical and/or real. Since athletes have a cognitive delay in processing information (especially words), the challenge is to make concepts concrete. For example, when teaching the 3-second lane in basketball, a coach can use the physical words of "hot" and "cold" to assist an athlete learning the concept. "Hot" refers to the lane on offense; the athlete will burn up if he stops in the lane and not move through it. "Cold" refers to the lane at the defensive end of the court. The lane is cool and the athlete's friend. *(Addresses difficulty in understanding concepts and desired actions)*
 - **Be concise:** Use a few descriptive "key words" or cues. Do not use long sentences or multi-part instructions. For example: "Reach for the sky." *(Addresses an athlete's difficulty in understanding verbal instructions and desired actions)*
 - **Be consistent:** Use the same word or words for the same action. *(Addresses an athlete's need for repetition and reinforcement)*
 - **Words are command-oriented:** Verbally reinforce the athlete immediately after a desired action. Make the reinforcement action-oriented and specific to the skill. *(Addresses an athlete's need for frequent motivation and words associated with a physical action)*
- Make sure an athlete is looking at you when making a coaching point. When needed, physically prompt an athlete to look at you. *(Addresses difficulty in maintaining attention)*
- Ask athletes questions rather than always provide directions. Lead them to think for themselves. Verify athlete responses. *(Addresses independence because they are not always asked to think)*



Providing Appropriate Level of Assistance

- Assess what an athlete is ready to do; build upon strengths.
- Use appropriate levels of assistance for each athlete - verbal, visual (demonstration), physical prompt, physical assistance. Gradually reduce physical assistance in favor of simple cues and eventually no prompting at all. *(Addresses difficulty in learning and improving)*
 - The lower the ability athlete, the more assistance may be required.
 - Verbal cues should always be accompanied by demonstration.
 - Physical prompts may be needed to help the athlete get positioned properly.
 - When all else fails, move the athlete through the complete skill.
- Practice skills in situations that are related to the game or event. *(Addresses difficulty in generalizing to new situations)*
- Use drills and activities that involve many athletes at all times. *(Addresses slower rate of learning and the need for motivation and repetition)*
- Decide on the best method of teaching what is required in terms of game or event strategies. For example in team sports, build from skills to offense to defense. Concerning an offense in basketball:
 - Evaluate player strengths.
 - Design an offense based on those strengths.
 - Place people on the court where they can be successful.
 - Evaluate who can best play with whom.
 - Design a substitution schedule so that all players on the court contribute to the team and that each line up is effective.

MANAGING ATHLETE BEHAVIORAL CHALLENGES

- The goal is for coaches to teach and coach Special Olympics athletes more effectively. However, a coach may have certain expectations of an athlete that may not be realistic...not because the coach does not care, but because the coach does not understand or appreciate the differences that may exist.
- When an athlete exhibits what is generally perceived as inappropriate behavior(s), the inappropriate behavior(s) may not be defiance, acting out or silliness. These behaviors may simply be a reflection or part of the person and/or what is operating in the moment.
- Use the form provided (“Athlete Behavior Characteristics and Strategies to Improve Learning”) on pages 11-12. Identify the athlete’s behavior that is preventing the athlete from learning a skill. Identify a progression of strategies to positively affect learning.

3. Competition Experience

- Provide a realistic competition experience during each practice in order to improve confidence and performance under the pressure of real competition.
- In team sports, help athletes understand game concepts by providing immediate and concrete feedback. During scrimmages or practice games, stop the play to help athletes recognize critical situations and learn how to react successfully.
- Emphasize the value of enforcing the rules during training. Rules enforcement helps prepare athletes for participation in community sports and in life.

4. Cool-down and Stretching

- Having athletes do several light stretching with the major muscle groups will prevent muscle cramps and soreness and increase flexibility.
- Review the main themes of the training session; reward athlete performance, and talk about the next competition or training session.
- Warm-up and stretching
 - Specific rather than general
 - Use of safe stretching techniques
 - Difficulties with balance
 - Appropriate physical assistance
 - Simple and able to duplicate at home and at competition