

Coaching Special Olympics Athletes



Unit 3: Preparing for and Coaching During Competition

Competitions provide the opportunity for your athletes to show what they've learned in practice. Just as your athletes' focus shifts on competition days from learning and practicing to competing, your focus shifts from teaching skills to coaching athletes as they perform those skills in competitions. Of course, the competition is a teaching opportunity as well, but the focus is on performing what has been learned, participating, and having fun.

In Unit 2 you learned how to teach your athletes techniques and tactics; in this unit you will learn how to coach your athletes as they execute those techniques and tactics in contests. We provide important coaching principles that will guide you before, during, and after the competition.

Before the Competition

Just as you need a practice plan for what you will cover at each practice, you also need a “competition plan” for competition day. Your written competition plan should consist of your best strategies and plays, if applicable. The competition plan should also include the method of substitution or plan for alternating athletes that you'll be using.

Although the competition plan is important, you cannot focus on it only on competition day. Many coaches focus on how they will coach only during the actual competition, when instead preparations should begin well before the competition begins. Let's take a closer look at how you can prepare for competition-day coaching.

Coaching Assignments

Competition-day preparation should begin in the preseason when, as a staff, you decide and agree on the competition-day responsibilities each coach will assume. The staff should decide who will substitute, and who will record any statistics, keep charts, or other sport-specific information. As coaches arrive at the competition, each staff member should know his or her competition-day responsibilities and prepare for the competition just as the athletes do.



Coaching Tip

Every staff member should be assigned a competition-day responsibility and work as one team during the contest. Each member of the coaching staff should then focus on their specific responsibilities and work with the head coach and other staff members to make the competition run smoothly.

Preparations at Practice

A day or two before a contest, you should cover two things—in addition to techniques and tactics—to prepare your athletes for the competition. First, you must decide on specific team tactics you want to use, and second, discuss pre-competition particulars such as what to eat before the competition, what to wear, and when to be at the site where the team will leave together or the competition site. It is also a good idea to walk through the steps for how the team will arrive at the competition area, where the athletes will change into their uniforms, where the athletes will line up for the warm-up and what group and team drills will be used during the warm-up, if applicable.

Deciding Team Tactics

Some coaches see themselves as great strategists guiding their young athletes to victory. These coaches burn the midnight oil as they devise complex plans of attack.

There are several things wrong with this approach, but we'll point out two errors in terms of deciding tactics:

1. The decision on tactics should be made with input from athletes.
2. Tactics at this level don't need to be complex.



Perhaps you guessed right on the second point but were surprised by the first. Why should you include your athletes in deciding tactics? Isn't that the coach's role?

It's the coach's role to help athletes grow through the sport experience. Giving your capable athletes input here helps them to learn about the sport. It gets them involved at a planning level that often is reserved solely for the coach. It gives them a feeling of ownership; they're not just "carrying out orders" of the coach. They're executing the plan of attack that was jointly decided. Athletes who have a say in how they approach a task often respond with more enthusiasm and motivation.

Don't dampen the enthusiasm and motivation by concocting tactics that are too complex. Keep tactics simple. As you become more familiar with your athletes' tendencies and abilities, help them focus on specific tactics that will help them perform better.

It is often best to institute certain tactics that your athletes have practiced. These tactics should take advantage of your athletes' strengths. Again, give the athletes some input into what tactics might be employed during the competition.

Discussing Pregame Particulars

Athletes need to know what to do before a competition: what and when they should eat on competition day, what clothing they should wear to the competition, what equipment they should bring, and where and what time they should meet to leave with the group and when they should arrive at the competition site. Discuss these particulars with them and give them a plan to take home at the last practice before a competition.

- **Pre-competition Meal:** In general, the goal of the pre-competition meal is to fuel the athlete for the upcoming event, to maximize carbohydrate stores, and to provide energy to the brain. Some foods digest more quickly than others, such as carbohydrate and protein, so we suggest that the athlete consume these rather than fat, which digests more slowly. Good carbohydrate foods include spaghetti, rice, and bran. Good protein foods include low-fat yogurt and boneless, skinless chicken. Athletes should eat foods that they are familiar with and that they can digest easily. Big meals should be eaten three to four hours before the contest. Of course, athletes who don't have time for a pregame meal can use sport beverages and replacement meals, although they are not a good replacement for the pre-competition meal.
- **Clothing and Equipment:** At the contest athletes need their team uniform, appropriate shoes, if applicable, and any sport-specific equipment needed for the competition.
- **Time to Arrive:** Your athletes need to adequately warm up before a competition, ensure you leave with ample time to arrive at least one hour before the competition to go through the team warm-up. You can designate where you want the team to gather as they arrive at the competition site. Consider making a team rule stating that athletes must travel with the team and go through the complete team warm-up.

Facilities, Equipment, and Support Personnel

Although the site coordinator and officials have formal responsibilities for facilities and equipment, you should know what to look for to ensure that the contest is safe for all athletes. Download the "Facilities Inspection Checklist" in the Resource section of this course.)

You should arrive at the competition site early enough before the competition begins so you can check the site, check in with the site coordinator and officials, and greet each of your athletes as they arrive. If the officials don't arrive before the competition when they're supposed to, inform the site coordinator.

Unplanned Events

Part of being prepared to coach is to expect the unexpected. What do you do if athletes are late? What if you have an emergency and can't make the competition or will be late? What if the contest is rained out or otherwise postponed? Being prepared to handle out-of-the-ordinary circumstances will help you if unplanned events happen.



If athletes are late or do not come at all, you may have to make adjustments in your line up.

Although this may not be a major inconvenience, stress to your athletes the importance of being on time for two reasons:

1. Part of being a member of a team is being committed to and responsible for the other members. When athletes don't show up or show up late, they break that commitment.
2. Athletes need to go through a warm-up together to physically prepare for the competition and to connect with their teammates. Skipping the warm-up also risks injury.

Communicating With Parents

The groundwork for your communication with parents, guardians and/or caregivers will have been laid in the parent orientation meeting, through which parents learned the best ways to support their children's—and the whole team's—efforts. Help parents define success based not just on the competition outcome, but also on how the athletes are improving their performances and meeting other goals.

If parents yell at their children for mistakes made during the competition, make disparaging remarks about the officials or opponents, or shout instructions for which tactics to use, ask them to refrain and to instead support the team through their comments and actions. These standards of conduct should all be covered in the preseason parent/guardian/caregiver orientation.

When time permits, as parents gather at the competition site before the competition and before the team has come out together, you can let them know in a general sense what the team has been focusing on during the past week and what your goals are for the competition. However, your athletes must come first during this time, so focus on your athletes during the pre-competition warm-up.

After a competition, quickly come together as a staff and decide what to say to the team. Focus on what goals were met, who had outstanding performances, who gave maximum effort, who helped other teammates and what was needed at the next practice. Everyone should receive positive reinforcement for what they achieved even if the team did not win. Any athlete's self-worth should not be tied up in a win or a loss. Then informally assess with parents, as the opportunity arises, how the team did based not on the outcome, but on meeting performance goals and performing to the best of their abilities. Help parents understand competition as a process, not solely as a test that is pass/fail or win/lose. Encourage parents to reinforce that concept at home.

An emergency might cause you, the coach, to be late or miss a competition. In these cases, notify your assistant coach(es), if you have one or more, or the local coordinator. If notified in advance, a parent of an athlete or another volunteer might be able to step in for you or to assist the assistant coach who has become the head coach in your absence.

Sometimes a competition will be postponed because of inclement weather, unsafe field conditions, or for other reasons. If the postponement takes place before competition day, you must call every member of your team to let them know. If it happens while the teams are at the site preparing for the competition, gather your team members and tell them the news and explain why the competition has been postponed. Ensure that all your athletes have a ride are in their designated vehicles before you leave.

Warm-Up & Stretching

Athletes need to both physically and mentally prepare for a competition when they arrive at the site. Physical preparation involves warming up and stretching. Conduct the warm-up similarly to practice warm-ups, focusing on practicing skills and stretching. Ensuring your athletes are properly warmed up before the competition help prepare them mentally and physically so as to build their confidence, provide stability at a new site and reduce the potential for injury during the competition.

Develop the warm-up so that athletes practice techniques and tactics that will occur in the competition. You should also include the drills you use in your daily warm-up, but this doesn't mean that extensive time must be spent on each skill.



During the warm-up, remind your athletes of the following:

- Focus on the techniques and tactics that they've been working on in recent practices, reinforcing the things they've been doing well and their strengths.
- Briefly review the team tactics you focused on in the previous practice in preparation for this competition.
- Perform the tactics and skills to the best of their individual abilities and work together as a team.
- Work hard; be smart, and have fun!

During the Competition

Throughout the competition, you must keep the competition in the proper perspective and help your athletes do the same. You will observe how your athletes execute tactics and skills and how well they work together. You will make tactical decisions in several areas. You will model appropriate behavior, show respect for opponents and officials, and demand the same of your athletes. You will watch out for your athletes' physical safety and psychological welfare in terms of building their self-esteem and helping them manage stress and anxiety. Let's first focus on how you can help your team keep the proper perspective and then we can focus on the tactical decisions for competition-day performance.

Proper Perspective

Winning competitions is the short-term goal of your sport program; helping your athletes learn the tactics, skills, and sport-specific rules ... how to become fit and how to be good sports while participating in sport and in life are the long-term goals. Your athletes are "winning" when they are becoming better human beings through their participation in your sport. Keep that perspective in mind when you coach. You have the privilege of setting the tone for how your team approaches the competition. Keep winning and all aspects of competition in proper perspective, and your athletes will likely follow your lead.



Coaching Tip

During the competition when particular athletes on the team are competing, the focus should be on what is happening within the competition and how to prepare for what may come next.

Tactical Decisions

While you aren't called upon to be a great strategist, you are called upon to make tactical decisions in a couple of areas throughout a competition. You'll make decisions about slight adjustments to your athletes' tactics and about correcting athletes' performance errors or leaving the correction for the next practice.

Starting and Substituting Players

If you're coaching a team sport in which you'll need to be substituting and alternating players during the competition, you will need starting line-up and substitution a plan for how you'll make these changes and decisions.

When considering participation time, make sure that everyone on the team competes at least half of each competition or adjust their participation time, as necessary, based on the organization's rules. This should be your guiding principle as you consider starting and substitution patterns. We suggest you consider two options in substituting athletes:

1. *Substituting individually*

Replace one athlete with another. This offers you a lot of latitude in deciding who goes in when, and it gives you the greatest combination of athletes throughout the competition. It can be hard to keep track of participation time, but this could be made easier by developing a substitution schedule and assigning an assistant or a parent this task. (See Substitution Schedule in the resource area.) Also be aware of your organization's rules concerning participation time.

For example, in volleyball, you have the option of substituting athletes when the ball is dead when you decide to use individual substitution. You may tell players before the game that they will play the front row or the back row and then the substitute will play the back row or the front row, accordingly. Athletes will then know in advance when they should be on the court.



2. *Substituting by quarters in specific sports*

The advantage of substituting athletes after each quarter is that you can easily track participation time and athletes know how long they will be in before they might be replaced.

Adjusting Team Tactics

At the 8-to-9 and 10-to-11 age levels, you probably won't adjust your team tactics significantly during a competition. Rather, you'll focus on the basic tactics, and during breaks in the contest, you'll emphasize the specific tactics your team needs to work on. However, coaches of 12- to 14-year-olds might have reason to make tactical adjustments to improve their team's chances of performing well and winning. As the competition progresses, assess your opponent's style of performance and tactics and make adjustments that are appropriate—that is, those that your athletes are prepared for.

Consider the following examples:

- If coaching basketball or soccer, how do your opponents usually initiate their attack? Do they move the ball to get around, over, or through your defense? This can help you make defensive adjustments.
- If coaching tennis or badminton, will your opponent be an all-court player? Is your opponent quick and athletic, with no major strengths or weaknesses? The opponent's style of play should influence how you prepare an athlete for a match.
- If coaching baseball or softball, is the opposing team's defense shoddy? Do they have trouble in the areas of cutoffs and relays? This might prompt you to gamble on the bases more, trying to take the extra base.

Knowing the answers to these types of questions can help you formulate a competition plan and make adjustments during a competition. However, don't stress tactics too much during a competition. Doing so can take the fun out of the competition for the athletes. If you don't trust your memory, carry a pen and pad to note which team tactics and individual skills need attention in the next practice.

Correcting Errors

There are two types of errors: learning errors and performance errors. Learning errors are those that occur because athletes don't know how to perform a skill. Performance errors are made not because athletes don't know how to execute the skill, but because they make mistakes in carrying out what they do know.

Sometimes it's not easy to tell which type of error athletes are making. Knowing your athletes' capabilities helps you to determine if they know the skill and are simply making mistakes in executing it or if they don't know how to perform it. If they are making learning errors—that is, they don't know how to perform the skills—note this and cover it at the next practice. Competition time is not the time to teach skills.

If they are making performance errors, however, you can help athletes correct them during a competition. Athletes who make performance errors often do so because they have a lapse in concentration or motivation, or they are simply demonstrating human error. Competition and contact can also adversely affect a young athlete's technique and a word of encouragement about concentration may help. If you do correct a performance error during a competition, do so in a quiet, controlled, and positive tone of voice during a break or when the athlete is out of the competition.

For those making performance errors, you must determine if the error is just an occasional error that anyone can make or if it is an expected error for a young athlete at that stage of development. If the latter is the case, then the athlete may appreciate your not commenting on the mistake. The athlete knows it was a mistake and may already know how to correct it. On the other hand, provide an encouraging word and a "coaching cue." (For example in gymnastics, "remember to keep your knees tucked in") may be just what the athlete needs. Knowing the athletes and what to say is very much a part of the "art" of coaching.



Coaching Tip

Designate an area for your sport where athletes gather after they come out of the competition. In this area, you can speak to them either individually or as a group and make necessary adjustments.



Coach and Athlete Behavior

Another aspect of coaching on competition day is managing behavior—both yours and your athletes'. The two are closely connected.

Coach Conduct

You very much influence your athletes' behavior before, during, and after a competition. If you're up, your athletes are more likely to be up. If you're anxious, they'll take notice, and the anxiety can become contagious. If you're negative, they'll respond with worry. If you're positive, they'll compete with more enjoyment. If you're constantly yelling instructions or commenting on mistakes and errors, it will be difficult for athletes to concentrate. Instead, let athletes get into the flow of the competition.

The focus should be on positive competition and on having fun. (Download the Special Olympics Coach Code of Conduct.)

A coach who over organizes everything and dominates a competition is definitely not making it fun. So how should you conduct yourself during the contest?

Here are a few pointers:

- Be calm, in control, and supportive of your athletes.
- Encourage athletes often, but instruct during competition sparingly. Athletes should focus on their performance during competition, not on instructions shouted from the coach off to the side.
- If you need to instruct an athlete, do so when you're both off to the side, in a low-key manner. Never yell at athletes for making mistakes. Instead, briefly demonstrate or remind them of the correct technique and encourage them. Tell them how to correct the problem in the competition.

You should also make certain that you have discussed the appropriate demeanor with your staff and that every coach is in agreement to the way they will conduct themselves and then work to stick to it. Remember, you're not competing in a world championship! Athletic competitions are designed to help athletes develop their skills and themselves—and to have fun. So coach in a manner at competitions that helps your athletes do those things.

Athlete Conduct

You're responsible for keeping your athletes under control. Do so by setting a good example and by disciplining when necessary. Set team rules for good behavior. If athletes attempt to cheat, fight, argue, badger, yell disparaging remarks, and the like, it is your responsibility to confront the misbehavior. Initially, it may mean removing athletes immediately from the competition, letting them calm down, and then speaking to them quietly, explaining that their behavior is not acceptable for your team and if they want to participate, they must not repeat the action. (Download "Special Olympics Athlete Code of Conduct" from the Resources section.)

Consider team rules in these areas of competition conduct:

- Athlete language
- Athlete behavior
- Interactions with officials or judges
- Discipline for misbehavior
- Dress code for competitions

Physical Safety

Safety during competition can be affected by how officials call the rules. If officials aren't calling rules correctly and this risks injury to your athletes, you must intervene. Voice your concern in a respectful manner and in a way that places the emphasis where it should be: on the athletes' safety. One of the officials' main responsibilities is to provide for athletes' safety. Both you and the officials are working together to protect the athletes whenever possible. Don't hesitate to address an issue of safety with an official when the need arises.

Athlete Welfare

All athletes are not the same. Some attach their self-worth to winning and losing. This idea is fueled by coaches, parents, peers, and society, who place great emphasis on winning. Athletes become anxious when

they're uncertain whether they can meet the expectations of others or of themselves—especially when meeting a particular expectation is important to them.



If you place too much importance on the competition or cause your athletes to doubt their abilities, they will become anxious about the outcome and their performance. If your athletes look uptight and anxious during a contest, find ways to reduce both the uncertainties about how their performance will be evaluated and the importance they are attaching to the competition. Help athletes focus on realistic personal goals—goals that are reachable and measurable and that will help them improve their performance all while having fun as they participate. Another way to reduce anxiety on competition day is to stay away from emotional pre-competition pep talks. Instead remind athletes of the tactics and plans they will use and to work hard, to do their best, and to have fun.

When coaching during competition, remember that the most important outcome from sport participation is to **build or enhance athletes' self-worth**. Keep that firmly in mind, and strive to promote this through every coaching decision.

Opponents and Officials

Respect opponents and officials. Without them, there wouldn't be a competition. Officials help provide a fair and safe experience for athletes and, as appropriate, help them learn the sport. Opponents provide opportunities for your team to test itself, improve, and excel.

You and your team should show respect for opponents by giving your best efforts. Showing respect means being civil to your opponents. Don't allow your athletes to "trash talk" or taunt an opponent. This behavior is disrespectful to the spirit of the competition and to the opponent. Immediately remove athletes from a competition if they trash talk or taunt an opponent. When appropriate, request that violations be called. Enforcing the rules and calling violations assists athletes in maintaining a high level of their skills and reinforces their learning the rules. As long as the calls are being made consistently on both sides, most of your officiating concerns will be alleviated.



Coaching Tip

Keep your demeanor even and positive, conduct your responsibilities the same regardless of the score, help correct your athletes' errors in a positive manner, and continue to offer encouragement to each athlete.

After the Competition

When the competition is over, join your team in congratulating the coaches and athletes of the opposing team, then be sure to thank the officials. Check on any injuries athletes may have sustained during the competition and inform athletes of how to care for them. Be prepared to speak with the officials about any problems that occurred during the competition. Then hold a brief meeting—or "team circle"—to ensure that your athletes are on an even keel, whether they won or lost.

Reactions Following the Competition

When celebrating a victory, make sure your team does so in a way that doesn't show disrespect for the opponents. It is okay and appropriate to be happy and celebrate a win, but do not allow your athletes to taunt the opponents or boast about their victory. Keep winning in perspective. Winning and losing are a part of life, not just a part of sport. If athletes can handle both equally well, they'll be successful in whatever they do.

Athletes are competitors, and competitors are disappointed in defeat. If your team has made a winning effort, let them know this. After a loss, help them keep their chins up and maintain a positive attitude that will carry over into the next practice and contest.



Coaching Tip

Immediately following a competition, regardless of the outcome, stay positive. When the athletes return to practice after a competition, make certain that you let the previous competition go, learn from the experience, make needed corrections, and focus on the next opponent and next competition.



Post-Competition Team Meeting

Following the competition, gather your team for a “team circle” in a designated area for a short meeting. The athletes can sit or kneel on one knee, and they may take off any extra equipment, if applicable. Before this meeting, decide as a coaching staff what to say and who will say it. Be sure that the coaching staff speaks with one voice following the competition.

If your athletes have performed well in a contest, compliment them and congratulate them. Tell them specifically what they did well, whether they won or lost. This will reinforce their desire to repeat their good performances. Don't use this time to criticize individual athletes for poor performances in front of teammates. Help athletes improve their skills, but do so in the next practice, not immediately after the competition.

The post- competition team circle isn't the time to go over tactical problems and adjustments. The athletes are either so happy after a win or so dejected after a loss that they won't absorb much tactical information. Your first concern should be your athletes' attitudes and mental well-being. You don't want them to be too high after a win or too low after a loss. This is the time you can be most influential in keeping the outcome in perspective and keeping them on an even keel. Remember, too, that although the final outcome of the competition may be extremely important to you, the staff, and some of the parents, for athletes the biggest concern may be whether they will get pizza or not. Realize that the majority of your athletes are participating to have fun, and understand that their desire to go out together for something to eat rather than reliving the competition is not a reflection on their desire to perform well. Stay positive, allow the athletes to be kids, and avoid making too much over the outcome of the competition.

Finally, gather your athletes, coaches and parents/providers, go to your vehicles and drive home. Ensure your athletes have transportation home; ensure full supervision of your athletes.