



**Special Olympics**

## **Changing Attitudes** Changing the World

### Changing Lives through Sport – A Report Card on the Impact of Special Olympics

Individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID), with critical support from their families, face a daunting array of challenges in their efforts to lead quality lives. These challenges affect every aspect of their lives, including where they go to school, where they live, the type and quality of health care they receive, their opportunities for gainful employment and careers, and, importantly, their ability to participate in a meaningful way in their communities and society at large. In many countries, including the United States, laws have been established and programs developed to support the participation and decent treatment of people with ID. But, as Special Olympics research has indicated, people with ID still are discounted and denied opportunity on a routine basis, even in countries with years of experience in advocating for people with ID. In countries that have not gone through such a societal evolution regarding people with ID, the lives of these people are generally stark and put at risk in myriad ways.

Special Olympics recently documented, through large-scale objective assessments (Special Olympics Impact Survey, Special Olympics Athlete Participation Survey) both the impact of its programs on the lives of its U.S. athletes and the reach of its programs in the United States and around the world. As such, these data can be viewed as a report card on the state of Special Olympics athletes and the Special Olympics movement.

Special Olympics was created to address the neglect and disregard of this population by using sport as a vehicle and stage for demonstrating the dignity and capability of people with ID. Special Olympics was designed to offer direct service, support and a rare opportunity to people with ID, but, at the same time, to impact the perspectives of society at large toward this population. Over the 37 years of Special Olympics history, there is extensive documentation of competitions waged, medals won and barriers overcome around the world. Athletes, families,

coaches, volunteers and spectators repeatedly have witnessed many small and large miracles through Special Olympics.

While Special Olympics has been widely viewed as a very humane and needed program for people with a disability, it has had to work hard to communicate that it is also an important program, based on sound scientific principles, that is producing significant benefits to its rapidly growing body of constituents and society as a whole. Documenting such impacts in terms of quality and scope and the opportunities to enhance and expand them is an appropriate expectation of a program that involves millions of people annually around the world.

#### **Documenting the Impact of Special Olympics**

In 2004, Special Olympics commissioned a multi-legged study of the impact of Special Olympics programs on the lives of its athletes in the United States. The study included survey research of current and former athletes, coaches and family members from a representative sample of U.S. athletes and coaches. The approach was to assess the athlete experience and benefits received through participation in Special Olympics. A unique aspect of this study was the direct assessment of the athlete experience through surveys of the athletes themselves. Both current and former athletes were interviewed by telephone. Interviews of family members and coaches along similar lines allowed for cross-checking response patterns for consistency. The study was conducted over a period of four months starting in October 2004. Overall, more than 2,000 interviews were conducted - 579 athletes (303 active, 276 inactive), 1,307 family members and 300 coaches were interviewed, representing 17 Special Olympics Programs in the United States. It is the most comprehensive assessment to date of the impact of the Special Olympics experience on the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. The study was carried out by the University of Massachusetts Boston

# Sports

and the University of Utah with support from the Gallup Organization. Dr. Gary Siperstein and Coreen Harada from the University of Massachusetts Boston and Dr. Michael Hardman and Jayne Maguire from the University of Utah served as investigators.

Additionally, Special Olympics conducts an annual review of athlete participation throughout its global movement. This standardized measurement effort helps track progress against Special Olympics' global growth strategy to reach 2 million athletes by the end of 2005. Progress toward this goal for 2004 was determined recently through the 2004 Athlete Participation Survey.

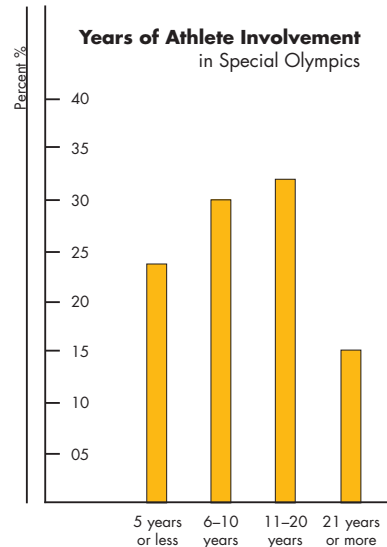
#### The study of Special Olympics' impact on U.S. athletes indicates that:

- People with intellectual disabilities most typically come to Special Olympics during childhood and participate for more than a decade.
- There is a successful partnership between Special Olympics and schools. More than two-thirds of U.S. athletes join Special Olympics through a school-based program.

While Special Olympics has not relied exclusively on schools as a basis of outreach to athletes, the well-established relationship between community schools and community Special Olympics Programs reflects a sound and efficient program model.

#### Who are Special Olympics athletes?

By definition and requirements, Special Olympics athletes are individuals with an intellectual disability that is manifest before age 18 which renders the individual challenged in at least two areas of daily functioning. The causes of the intellectual disability in athletes are quite varied. Athletes who participate fully in Special Olympics must be at least 8 years of age and there are no upper age limits. Athletes must be certified as medically qualified to join Special Olympics and, in the case of minors and non-emancipated adults, have consent of parents or guardians. In addition to intellectual disability, athletes also may have one or more additional disabilities (e.g., hearing or vision impairments, spina bifida).



More than half (52 percent) of adult Special Olympics athletes in the United States are employed, half of those in competitive employment. While reliable data about the employment status of the general population of adults with intellectual disabilities are hard to come by, values as low as 10 percent have been cited. This suggests a strong relationship between Special Olympics participation and the ability to be employed.

“When given the opportunity, Special Olympics athletes can speak for themselves and provide us with valuable insight into their lives.”

— Gary Siperstein, Ph.D.,  
Principal Investigator

### Initial Involvement in Special Olympics\*

School-Based Program	67%
Community-Based Program	16%
Group Home-Based Program	4%
Workplace-Based Program	3%
Independent/Other	10%

\*U.S. Athletes

### Employment (Over 18)

Sheltered Workshop	28%
Business in Community	24%
Total Employment	52%

### Special Olympics athletes are like athletes everywhere

- Similar to other athletes, Special Olympics athletes enjoy the social experiences that accompany participation in sports training and competition. Teammates provide an important and valuable source of friendship, with more than half of the athletes socializing with teammates outside of Special Olympics.
- Similar to other athletes, Special Olympics athletes are motivated to participate by their enjoyment of sports and by the competition Special Olympics provides. In an athlete's own words, "I like to prove to myself that I can do it."

Similar to other athletes, Special Olympics athletes are serious about their sports. They take an athlete oath and have led efforts to establish a coaches' oath. They are not seeking sympathy or even special treatment. They have a love of sport and training and appreciate development of personal sports skills; however, they state clearly and consistently that the greatest rewards they experience are from the enjoyment of sports, the social opportunities provided and the chance to make friends on and off the field.

### Athletes' Motives for Participation

Most Often Mentioned	Athlete (N=579)	Family (N=1307)
Fun/Enjoyment	97%	94%
Social Aspects	96%	88%
Winning/Competition	95%	85%

"During the 2003 Special Olympics World Summer Games in Dublin, Ireland, 38 individual athletes' performances would have bettered performances by athletes in the 2004 International Summer Olympics in Athens."

The rationales for participation are similar to other athletes at various levels and in various programs. Even those who leave Special Olympics due to life changes overwhelmingly express their satisfaction with their Special Olympics experience and would be willing to reestablish their participation if circumstances permitted.

- Participation in Special Olympics spurs activity and pursuit of physical fitness as a lifestyle choice. More than half of the athlete respondents reported three or more hours of physical activity per week in addition to their participation in Special Olympics.

### Special Olympics provides opportunities for advancement and new experiences

- Throughout their careers, Special Olympics athletes take advantage of the variety of individual and team sports offered through the organization and participate in multiple sports—from track and field to bowling, basketball and softball.
- When participating in Special Olympics, athletes have the opportunity to compete not only in their community Games, but also can advance to regional, state, national and even worldwide competitions. In fact, more than half of U.S. Special Olympics athletes advance beyond their local competitions to compete at the regional and state level.

It is typical for athletes, whether in Special Olympics or otherwise, to seek to reach both personal and team goals. Special Olympics athletes typically participate in several sports at any stage of their athletic careers and often diversify their sports experience over time. This presents many choices and opportunities. Choice and opportunity are things most people cherish, but that people with intellectual disabilities have generally been denied in their lives. Additionally, in Special Olympics, athletes are encouraged and enabled to lead with their ideas and voices, through participating on boards and committees, working in Special Olympics Programs or serving as coaches, officials or in other volunteer roles.

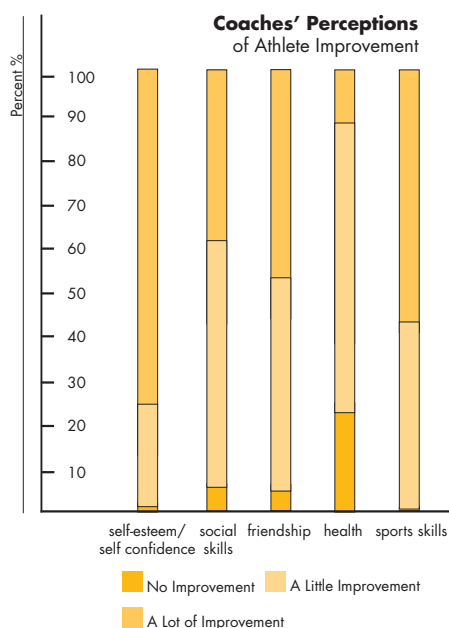
### Special Olympics provides quality programming through qualified staff

- The quality of the Special Olympics experience for athletes largely can be attributed to the experience and knowledge of coaches. Almost all coaches (95 percent) have received Special Olympics sports training and 85 percent have had training in the area of disabilities. Most coaches (70 percent) also have participated in competitive sports at some time in their lives, with one in four having competed at the college level.

### Coaches' Training in Sports Disabilities

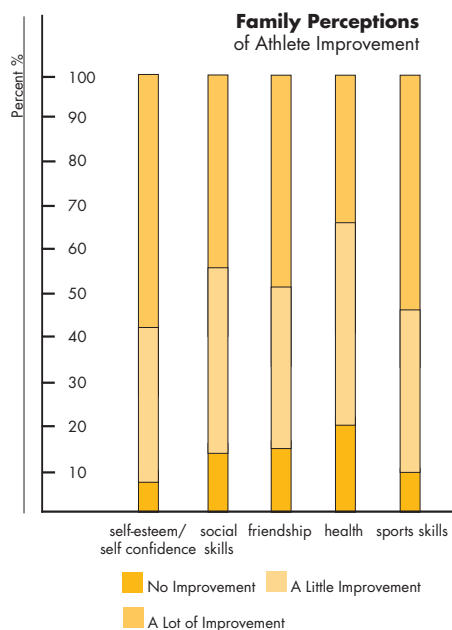
Training in Coaching	Frequency
General Special Olympics Orientation	95%
Special Olympics Sports-Specific Training	93%
Unified Sports® Training	42%
Non-Special Olympics Workshops	85%
College Courses	52%

- Coaches in Special Olympics know their athletes and their motivations for participating. Coaches (76 percent) share athletes' and families' goals for participation, such as improved sense of self and more positive social experiences.
- Coaches observed improvement in many areas for their athletes, most evidently in the areas of self-esteem and self-confidence, followed by improvement in sport skills. Coaches' responses also confirmed families' perceptions of improvement and athletes' reasons for participation.



### What impacts does Special Olympics have on athletes and families?

- The benefits of participation in Special Olympics are substantial for its athletes. There is an overwhelming consensus among athletes, coaches and family members that there is significant improvement in athletes' sense of self, social skills and social interactions due to their participation in Special Olympics.
- Families of athletes with intellectual disabilities want the same things for their children as do other families. Parents hope that by participating in sports their children feel good about themselves and develop a strong sense of self-confidence and self-esteem. They also see health benefits that are critical given the unmet health needs of this population.



Special Olympics works toward providing lifelong sports experience for its participants. As an organization, it continues to shape itself according to the changing developmental needs of its athletes as they transition through childhood, adolescence and adulthood (for example, a Young Athletes™ program for individuals ages 2–7 currently is being pilot tested).

Special Olympics continues to work at bringing the positive experiences it has offered to individuals with intellectual disabilities in the United States to those throughout the world who otherwise would not be given these same opportunities. Special Olympics plans on extending the study of its impact on athletes beyond the United States to Europe and China during 2005–2006.

### Policy Implications

Demonstrating the positive impacts of any program on its intended beneficiaries, while also expanding service to more and more people, are hallmarks of effective programming. In the Special Olympics Impact Survey, we see that Special Olympics has enabled athletes to not only train for sporting events, but also train for life. The fact that service expansions are taking place most rapidly outside the United States means that some of the neediest populations in the world are now being reached.

Through their voices, U.S. Special Olympics athletes have provided Special Olympics with a very positive report card on the impact that Special Olympics has on their lives. Combined with insights from family members and coaches, this represents a very strong validation of Special Olympics as a service provider and a movement. As proven by the execution of this study, research conducted with direct input of people with intellectual disabilities is both possible and informative.

The evidence from the Special Olympics Impact Study clearly illustrates that Special Olympics enables people with intellectual disabilities to demonstrate and experience sports competence and suggests that gains in self-confidence, self-esteem, employment and socialization can carry beyond Special Olympics.

In 2004, Special Olympics served more than 1.73 million athletes in 150 countries (and all U.S. states). This reflects more than 76 percent growth over a four-year-period, notwithstanding the significant challenges created for profit and nonprofit organizations post “9–11.” However, given reported estimates of as high as 6 million people with ID in the United States and the fact that the benefits realized through Special Olympics have reached only 512,804 people with ID in that country, much more can be done. Globally, up to 170 million people are reported to have intellectual disabilities.

For the benefits of Special Olympics to be sustained and further extended, additional support will be required from multiple sources, including government and the private sector, as well as organizations. Special Olympics opportunities can only grow if resources permit, including an adequate supply of coaches and volunteers.

In its continuing efforts to grow Special Olympics globally, Special Olympics is committed to assuring the quality and consistency of its programs and the satisfaction of its customers (athletes, families) and its key volunteers, including coaches.

## References

- Farrell, R. J., Crocker, P. R. E., McDonough, M. H., & Sedgwick, W. A. (2004). The driving force: Motivation in Special Olympians. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 21(2), 153–166.
- Gill, D. L., Gross, J. B., & Huddleston, S. (1983). Participation motivation in youth sports. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 14, 1–14.
- Gould, D., Feltz, D., & Weiss, M. (1985). Motives for participating in competitive youth swimming. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 16(2), 126–140.
- Shapiro, D. R. (2003). Participation motives of Special Olympics athletes. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 20(2), 150–166.
- Siperstein G.N., M.L.: National Evaluation of the Special Olympics Unified Sports Program (Study Commissioned by Special Olympics). Washington, D.C. December 2001.
- U.S.D.H.H.S. Closing the Gap: A National Blueprint to Improve the Health of Persons with Mental Retardation. National Institutes of Health, Bethesda. February 2002.
- Corbin S.B., Malina K, Shepherd S. Special Olympics World Summer Games 2003—Healthy Athletes Screening Data. Washington, D.C. Special Olympics, Inc. February 2005.
- President’s Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities. A Charge we have to Keep. Washington, D.C. 2004.