

COMPETITION AND THE DIVISIONING PROCESS

Introduction

Special Olympics competitions provide athletes with the opportunity to demonstrate sports skills they have acquired during training. Special Olympics athletes, like all dedicated athletes, strive for their best performance at each competition. To enhance their competitive experience, competitions should be organized to highlight the athletes. In Special Olympics, this means that, regardless of an athlete's place of finish, each performance is considered a personal victory. The athlete is most important.

Special Olympics has developed modified rules, when necessary, in order to maximize the successful participation of all athletes and encourage competition throughout every level of the organization. Competitions must be conducted consistently, in accordance with these rules, and capably officiated.

The fundamental difference which sets Special Olympics competitions apart from those of other sports organizations is that athletes of all ability levels are encouraged to participate and every athlete is recognized for his or her performance. Competitions are structured so that athletes compete with other athletes of similar ability in equitable divisions. Historically, Special Olympics has suggested that all divisions be created where the variance between the highest and lowest (or slowest and fastest) scores within a division not differ by more than 10%. This "10% statement" is not a rule, but should be used as a starting point or a guideline for establishing equitable divisions when the number of athletes competing is appropriate.

Divisioning Procedures

An athlete's ability is the primary factor in divisioning Special Olympics competition. The ability of an athlete or team is determined by an entry score from prior competition(s) or a preliminary event/trial at the competition itself. Other factors which are also significant in establishing competitive divisions are age and gender.

Ideally, competition is enhanced when all divisions accommodate at least three and no more than eight competitors or teams of similar ability. In some cases, however, the number of athletes or teams within a competition will be insufficient to achieve this goal. The following are examples of procedures utilized to attempt to create equitable divisions:

1. Divide Athletes by Gender (unless identified as coed)
 - a. Females vs. Females/Males vs. Males
 - b. Males and females may compete against each other if similar in age and ability.
 - c. If the athlete is the only member of his/her sex in a division, he/she may compete against the opposite sex similar in age and ability.
 - d. Special Olympics rules regulate that all athletes must be divisioned against at least one other person (two if possible) for competition purposes.
 - e. If there is only one athlete of any age or ability in an event, he/she may still compete as a single-person division.

2. Divide Athletes by Age -- An athlete's age group for competition is determined by his/her age on the opening date of the competition.
 - a. Divide athletes into age groups: 8-11, 12-15, 16-21, 22-29, 30+, 50+
 - b. Athletes should compete in their age group unless:
 - 1) An age group has less than three competitors, so they shall compete in the next oldest group.
 - 2) The athletes are "moved up," so they will be grouped by ability with athletes in that group. (Example: 8-11 year olds move up to 12-15 group and some divisions become Juniors, 8-15 years.)
3. Divide Athletes by Ability
 - a. Rank athletes from high to low performances from entry scores or preliminary/trial scores. Group as many possible together per division (based upon three to eight per division and utilizing a starting point of 10% difference - though 15% or 20% may be necessary to create divisions when athlete populations are low.)
 - b. When athletes' extreme highs and lows are problems, athletes should be merged with higher age groups or combined with similar ability groups of the opposite sex. Finally, if an athlete's score is so extreme, he/she should be assigned to a division more similar to their own ability, regardless of age group, in order to ensure the chance to compete against other athletes.
 - c. If preliminary/trial events are held, these "onsite" scores will be utilized in a manner similar to the previously noted divisioning procedures. The value of preliminary/trial events is the similarity of judging, playing facility, environmental conditions, etc. for all athletes and the resulting consistency of scores to aid in the divisioning process and, hopefully, to create equitable competition.
4. Team Divisioning -- Teams will be based upon ability with divisions that are created via scores of previous competitions, competitions on site - preliminary rounds/games (volleyball and bocce will also include the Special Olympics Skill Assessments Tests – SAT's).
 - a. If possible, divisions will also be based upon same sex competition.
 - b. If possible, divisions will be based upon age groups.

NOTE: A team with at least one male on it will be categorized as a male team. Similarly, a team will be placed in an age category based upon the oldest player's age.

Conclusion

The goal is always to create equitable divisions of three to eight athletes or teams. A variation of 10% in ability from highest to lowest performances in each division is the ideal situation; however, 15% or 20% is often necessary if numbers and abilities vary. Sex, age and ability may be "merged" in order to guarantee the chance for athletes to compete against others. These types of "merges" are most often categorized as coed, open or coed open division. Lastly, despite the most perfect 10% groupings, finishes may vary greatly - sport is affected by weather, illness, excitement, state of mind, medicine, time of day, sleep, diet, etc. There is no "sure thing" in the divisioning process or in any event's final outcome.