

Including and Coaching Individuals with Disabilities in Recreational Youth Sport Programs

David A. Feigley, Ph.D.
Linda M. Sharkey, CTRS
Joanne Hunt, CTRS

In community youth sport programs (vs. “travel ball”) enrollment is typically open to everyone - regardless of ability or prior experience. Participants range from beginners to those with years of experience and hours of privatized instruction. In turn, the “all play” philosophy of recreation programs often creates significant challenges for volunteer coaches. In addition to being responsible for coaching individuals with differing skills, knowledge, and experience, it is not uncommon for these volunteers to assume the responsibility of coaching individuals with disabilities. In fact, under federal law, disabled athletes must be included if “reasonable accommodations” to rules, policies, or practices can be made.

Inclusion, or the integration of people with and without disabilities in youth sport programs, is governed by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). A key component of this law addresses the need for individuals with disabilities to receive services in the least restrictive setting or environment. In other words, administrators must make every effort to include children with physical, sensory, behavioral, and intellectual disabilities in their youth sport programs.

While most administrators and volunteer coaches readily support inclusion, they often lack specific information for effectively including and coaching individuals with disabilities. Furthermore, inclusion requires teamwork between administrators, coaches, parents and athletes to help participants overcome challenges, and to collaborate on facilitation strategies for bringing about an optimal experience.

A remarkable similarity exists between effective strategies for including and coaching both disabled and non-disabled athletes in community recreational sport programs. Differences are more often a matter of degree as opposed to qualitatively different strategies. For example, “Keep it simple!” is just as applicable for t-ball coaches as it is for those who coach individuals with disabilities. “Assessing an athlete’s initial ability” or “Avoid making assumptions about the athlete’s skills and needs” are clearly just as applicable to the non-disabled population as they are to disabled athletes.

This resource, originally funded by the NJ Developmental Disabilities Council, is designed to:

1. guide youth sport administrators in placing athletes with disabilities into the “least restrictive” environments, in order to maximize the quality of the athletes’ experience in recreational sports;

2. provide specific guidelines for coaching individuals with disabilities;
3. assist coaches and administrators with finding additional sources of information for coaching individuals with disabilities;
4. highlight “best practices”, in the form of actual case studies, for integrating disabled athletes into the least restrictive playing environments.

This information is organized as follows:

Page 1 - An “Inclusion Model” for Placing Individuals with Disabilities in Recreational Youth Sport Programs.

Page 2 - General Guidelines for Coaching Individuals with Disabilities

Page 3 - Coaching Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities

Page 4 - Coaching Individuals with Behavioral Disorders

Page 5 - Coaching Individuals with Neuromuscular Disabilities - Cerebral Palsy and Spina Bifida

Page 6 – Coaching Individuals with Amputations/Limb Deficiencies

Page 7 – Coaching Wheelchair Participants

Page 8 - Coaching Individuals with Visual Impairments

Page 9 – Coaching Individuals with Hearing Impairments

Case Studies

1. Moderate Down Syndrome in Basketball (23-28 years olds)
2. Visually Impaired, Legally Blind in Baseball, Soccer & Golf (10 year old)
3. Post Polio in Basketball, Track & Swimming (14 year old)
4. Permanently Disabled Leg in Golf (16 year old)
5. Mental Retardation in Swimming (19 year old)
6. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in T-Ball (6 year old)
7. Mentally Impaired in Baseball & Soccer (9 year old)
8. Moderate Hearing Loss in Baseball, Soccer & Basketball (9 year old)
9. Congenital Below Elbow Limb Deficiency in Basketball, Soccer & Swimming (9 year old)
10. Neurological Impairment, Communication Handicap (Learning Disability) in Horseback Riding
11. Neurological Impaired, ADHD in Bowling & Track & Field (14 year old)
12. Spastic Cerebral Palsy in Basketball (22 year -old)
13. Spina Bifida in Horseback Riding (34 year old)

14. Developmental Delay, Severe Expressive Language, Impaired Gross and Fine motor Skills in T-Ball & Swimming
15. Emotionally Disturbed, Conduct Disorder in Basketball (14 year old)
16. Legally Blind with Cognitive Delays (32 year-old)
17. Perceptually Impaired, Emotionally Disturbed: Conduct Disorder in Baseball (11 year old)
18. Mild Mental Retardation in Track (Sprints) (15 year old)
19. Mild/Moderate Mental Retardation in Swimming (32 year old)
20. Case Study Form – Complete and email this form to ysrc@rci.rutgers.edu for consideration as an additional resource for recreational youth sport administrators.