

Unified Sports© Mentoring vs. Competitive Soccer

What is Unified Sports?

A program that combines approximately equal numbers of Special Olympics athletes and athletes without intellectual disabilities on sports teams for training and competition against other Unified Sports© teams.

Unified Sports© Intended purpose:

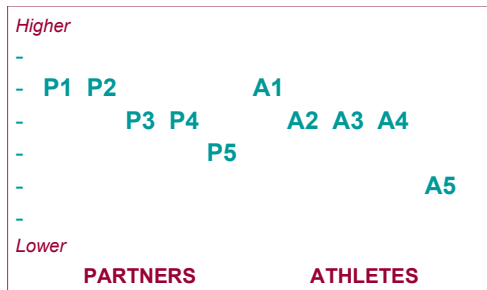
Unified Sports© teams are organized to provide meaningful involvement for all participants. Every teammate should play a role and have the opportunity to contribute to the team. Meaningful involvement also refers to the quality of interaction and competition within a Unified Sports© team. Achieving meaningful involvement by all participants on the team ensures a positive and rewarding experience for everyone.

In a true Unified Sports© competition there should be no distinction between an athlete and a partner and both participants should contribute to the success of the team. Thus the partner is not limited to scoring goals, stealing the ball etc.

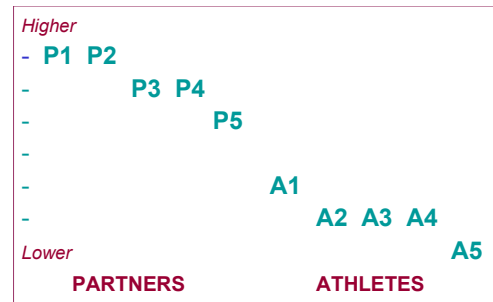
What SOMA has found:

SOMA has found we have two types of Unified teams at our soccer competitions: the Unified Sports© Level and the Mentoring Level.

Unified Level



Mentoring Level



What is the difference between these two levels?

The difference comes down to the philosophy of the teams. In the Unified level the partners and athletes on the team are viewed as equals and both have the same responsibilities on the field. The partners can shoot and score and play the game as it is intended to be played.

In the Mentoring level, the philosophy of the team is, the partners are there for the athletes, to facilitate the athletes' success on the field. The partner serves as an on field coach and mentor to the athletes. The overriding theme, to the mentoring model, is that the game is for the athletes. The partners involvement is to help the athletes succeed and in understanding the game and to help them achieve their goals.

Which Level / Philosophy is correct?

According to the Unified Sports© movement teams that participate in the mentoring model are not ready to move into a competitive format. However this eliminates many Unified Programs.

At SOMA, we believe, both philosophies are **CORRECT** and achieve the goals set forth by the Unified Sports© initiative:

- Sports Skills Development
- Competition Experiences
- Community Based Program
- Public Education
- Awareness
- Personal Development
- Family Involvement
- Inclusion

Both levels are beneficial to the athletes and the main focus is the development of the athlete as a soccer player and a team member. Thus giving both the athlete and the partner meaningful involvement and allowing them both to contribute to the success of the team.

What happens when the two levels / philosophies intersect?

We have learned that it is not a positive experience for either party involved. Teams accuse each other of not playing by the rules and having the wrong idea of what Unified Sports© is. This makes for a negative experience for all involved even though neither team is in the wrong.

How do we make the experience positive for everyone?

For the 2008 Fall Sports Season Special Olympics Massachusetts is introducing a new Unified Sports© Level for Soccer. In the past teams who registered in soccer had two options:

- Traditional Soccer
- Unified Soccer

Now teams register, they will have three options to choose from when registering:

- Traditional Soccer
- Unified Soccer
- Unified Mentoring Soccer

Purpose of the Unified Mentoring Level?

The purpose of the SOMA Unified Sports© Soccer Mentoring Level is to promote the growth of Special Olympics athletes particularly in the skills of soccer (shooting, passing, dribbling, etc.). The partners' primary role is to be a mentor/coach/educator on the field in the spirit of Special Olympics Massachusetts and in the spirit of sportsmanship.

At the Mentoring level the emphasis is to develop skill level and learn the basics of team play. The emphasis for the Unified level is to increase understanding of team play at a more competitive level and continue to develop skills.

The higher skilled level Special Olympians will benefit from the Unified Sports© concept. Unified sports allow the athletes to be on highly competitive teams where they can learn to how to be a team player and how to play a position. Whereas at the Unified mentoring level athletes will learn basic flow of the game and how to play as a team.

As one Unified Coach states "It is not fair to these higher level athletes to play in division where the other team (all the players) do not play defense against the athletes and do not try to get the ball from the other team.. It does not develop the skill of the high level athletes."

This coach goes on to say "I have four unified teams. The youngest team is a mentoring level team due to the low skill level of the athletes all under age 12. I can see the benefit for this team to be in a mentoring division. I can also see the benefit for my other teams to be in a unified division so the athletes can understand the game as it is meant to be played with athletes playing positions. In a game where athletes are not just passed the ball with the other team just standing there letting them score. In some cases if we let higher level athletes stay in these mentoring divisions we are doing a disservice to them as they are going to have a hard time adjusting to playing a "real" basketball game.

How will it work?

First teams must self identify themselves as either a Unified team or a Unified Mentoring team.

Unified Level:

- Everything is status quo.
- All FIFA, SOI and SOMA Modified Soccer Rules apply.
- Teams will be divisioned based on Age Groups and Ability.
 - Age group is determined by the oldest member of the team
- Partners can actively participate in all aspects of the game, including shooting and stealing the ball.
- This level is for more competitive teams.

Unified Mentoring Level:

- All FIFA, SOI, and SOMA modified soccer rules apply
- Teams will be divisioned based on Age Groups and Ability
 - Age group is determined by the oldest member of the team
- Partners may not shoot or score
- Partners may not steal the ball from an athlete
 - Partners may challenge the athlete but not steal the ball directly off their feet
 - The judgment about stealing the ball is left to the officials discretion

- Partners may play any position on the field except goalie
- Partners must be identified to the officials prior to the game and upon entering a game
- If any of the above rules are broken an in-direct free kick shall be awarded to the opposing team
 - Officials will use their discretion in giving yellow and red cards for a player who is breaking the rules excessively
- Mentoring Level teams would be eligible for out of state competitions that offer a Mentoring level competition
- Since no mentoring level is offered at National or World game competitions, mentoring level teams will not be eligible to compete at these events