

DIVISIONING

The fundamental difference between Special Olympics competitions and those of other sports organizations is that athletes of all ability levels are encouraged to participate, and every athlete is recognized for his/her performance. Competitions are structured so that athletes compete with other athletes of similar ability in equitable divisions.

Responsibilities of the Athletes

Athletes are expected to follow the Special Olympics Official Sport Rules and the Athlete's Code of Conduct. Athletes are also expected to give maximum effort when competing. This is the only way the divisioning process can work as it was intended. Athletes who do not participate honestly and with maximum effort in all preliminary trials and/or finals violate the true spirit of competition and may even be disqualified from competition.

Responsibilities of the Coach

Therefore, coaches must place the health and safety of Special Olympics athletes above all else. They too must follow the Official Sport Rules and the Coaches Code of Conduct. Coaches are also critical in helping competition management teams make divisioning work. Divisioning works best when coaches submit preliminary scores. This helps athletes get into the proper division as well as gain additional competition experience.

How Divisioning is Implemented

Special Olympics divisioning is a two-stage process and can look different for each sport. See each sport section for specific details on how each sport divisions.

1. Stage 1
 - a. For individual sports, coaches submit a time or distance for each athlete.
 - b. For team or judged sports (like basketball or equestrian), coaches submit athlete or team rating, game record, and/or player evaluations.
2. Stage 2
 - a. Divisioning races, judged events, or short team matches are held to assess the athletes' or teams' ability levels in competition.
 - b. Athletes or teams are then grouped into competitive divisions according to three criteria: age, gender, and ability level.

How many athletes or teams are in a division?

For individual sports, each division may include a minimum of 3 athletes and a maximum of 8 athletes. For team sports, each division/bracket may include a minimum of 3 teams and a maximum of 5 teams.

Age Groups or Gender groups could be combined for some events so that we can ensure a meaningful experience by having at least 3 athletes in each division. Ability levels is the primary factor and should not be combined, unless they are awarded separately.

How are divisions set?

Divisions are set differently based on the number of athletes that have historically entered for that sport to ensure that there are competitive divisions with at least 3 athletes per division. See each sport section on the percentage between the most highly skilled athlete and the lowest skilled athlete. Skill rating is based on the athlete's time, score, or average.

Protest based on divisioning are not allowed.

Maximum Effort

The Maximum Effort rule is an Special Olympics International rule that is put in place to ensure that all participants are competing with maximum effort at all levels of competition. This rule is used:

1. To provide a fair competitive environment for athletes
2. To provide a resource for officials/event directors to create a fair competitive environment.

The maximum effort rule (MER) establishes an improvement limit for timed/scored competitions to ensure that all athletes are participating in fair and honest competitions. If an athlete or Unified partner exceeds the Maximum Effort limit, then the athlete or Unified partner may be disqualified based on the standards set for each sport. Each of our sports follows different Maximum Effort rules based on the nature of the sport. Please see each sport section for more details on what is implement for each sport.