

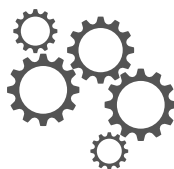
The importance of Special Olympics in Great Britain

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Introduction

What?

The aim of this research project is to understand how (and why) the sporting programmes delivered by Special Olympics Great Britain are important for athletes and their wider network of family, support people, coaches, club administrators and other volunteers.

Why?

If we know what makes Special Olympics important and what the benefits are, then:

- More athletes and families will want to join
- More people will want to volunteer
- More corporates and sponsors will want to provide money and other support

How?

This research was done in Scotland and England from June to September 2025.

In-depth interviews were done with 11 athletes, 2 athlete/coaches and 13 coaches, club administrators and/or family members.

- Average age: 46
- Average length of involvement in Special Olympics: 15 years

Participants' own words are used to illustrate the main themes presented in this report. You will find them as italic bullet point quotes.

Key elements

Perseverance through challenge



Athletes persevere through challenges like injury and failure:

- One athlete told how they had an accident about quarter of the way through a race and says *"I broke myself", but they got up, continued, caught the rest of the field and "I won a medal."*

Coaches persevere through their own challenging weeks:

- *"If you come every week and you have a delightful time, even if there's hard weeks and some of the athletes are having a difficult time – maybe they've had a hard day at work, they come in and they're a bit upset, it's our job, and the group's job, to champion each other."*

Everyone perseveres through the challenge of finding enough money to run the club and travel to competitions.



Athletes progress their skills and knowledge of their sport through attending regular training sessions:

- *"I like being on the hill, I like seeing all the other people. I like going really fast down the hill – I used to be scared but not now."* (Athlete)
- *"I feel so happy and relieved by seeing my son improving and learning new skill..."* (Parent)

There is also a clear competition pathway that allows athletes to progress from local and regional events, to National and World Games.

Coaches gain new skills that help them become better coaches:

- *"I've got to think outside this box, this comfortable box that I'm in - all my little tricks that I know, I need to adjust them."*
- *"I've been able to move my hobby and passion into something I now do as a job, and I have an impact on a lot more people because of it."*

Volunteers often gain a better understanding of intellectual and learning disabilities:

- *"I learned a few things through volunteering to calm autism down, one was to not get on the level when they're shouting and being loud and boisterous, not to get up that high with them, was to lower your voice so they come down with you - so you're meeting them half way with you, which I never knew."*
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Personal effort



Athletes commit a lot of time and effort to their sport, and some travel across the country to training sessions:

- “My team enjoy the training, even though it can be quite tough - they could choose to do anything else on a Saturday, but they always choose to give up 2 hours of their time to come here.” (Athlete/Coach)
- Another athlete told of going out of town for 3 nights every 2 months to train with others in their sport.

Coaches put in a lot of effort to help their athletes achieve their full potential:

- “They have the right to dream, and to dream to reach the best of their ability, and to win a medal at the best of their ability, and we’ve got to facilitate that and work it out.” (Coach)

Principles and culture



The Special Olympics culture is very inclusive:

- “I knew I was somewhere that I wanted to be... I was put at ease. I think I had some doubts coming here the first time, you know, meeting people for the first time, would they take to me, would I make friends easily?” (Athlete/Coach)

‘Divisioning’ puts athletes into categories that mean they are competing against others of the same ability - so it’s exciting.

There is a real sense of family and a sense of belonging, creating community for athletes as well as their families:

- “A lot of our athletes are quite isolated, so they get community here that they don’t get anywhere else.” (Club administrator)
- “You’re suddenly then exposed to other parents in the same place in life as you are with a special needs child, and who ‘get it’ and get what life is like, and get what Special Olympics means and competing means, and you get some good friendships across the country.” (Parent)

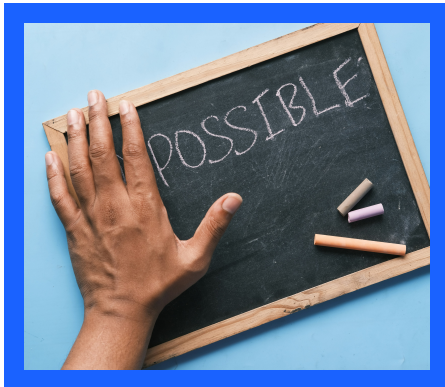
Pride and identity



Everyone is proud to be involved with Special Olympics, but for the athletes especially it's a big part of who they are:

- “Special Olympics is the best thing. If anyone else wants to try it, they should go and try it. It’s really good.” (Athlete)
- “Before, I’d hide my disability and not speak about it, but since [the World Games] I’ve started speaking about it a lot more – I’m not scared of it. And Special Olympics gives you that platform.” (Athlete)
- This proud parent says of their athlete, “When he’s here, he is one of the athletes. He is with the athletes, he is part of the crowd, he is with his friends.”

Lasting benefits



“The world is very small [for people with an intellectual or learning disability], and Special Olympics makes it huge.”

For athletes

Most have better physical health and fitness, and are more able to manage mental health complications such as depression, anxiety, and aggression:

- “It’s made me a better person than what I was. It’s kept me out of trouble, for one – kept me out of prison... I said [to myself] no, I’m not going there. It gives me focus, makes my life healthier, makes all your body healthier.” (Athlete/Coach)

Most have become more independent:

- “She’s learned how to take care of herself when she goes away – she can pack her bags, knows what kit she needs to take, can make sure she sets her own alarm, get up and dressed and ready to catch train/plane, and that’s not only when she’s competing at an event, but now even when we go on a family holiday.” (Parent)

Many participants commented on athletes’ increased confidence, self-esteem and reaching their full potential in all areas of life:

- “Making friends [...] Special Olympics has helped a lot of people. They helped me get more confidence with things – I was dead quiet at school, people used to bully me, and Special Olympics came and that changed all my life.” (Athlete)
- “It’s made him more confident and feeling able to achieve and thrive. And reaching his full potential, he really feels that he’s included and joined the group which has made him progress in life - and in all aspects of his life, not just in sport. It makes him feel I can do it and I can progress and I achieve and I’m same as everyone else.” (Parent)
- “I’ve used the sport to keep them active, to keep them healthy, to give them a bit more self-esteem, some self-belief, and I’ve allowed them to dream. And to push their limits – and through that, all the confidence. And you’ve included them.” (Coach)

All athletes had learned transferrable skills such as better communication which have helped them to get jobs or volunteering opportunities:

- “Talking to people I didn’t know, before I wasn’t confident but now I’m ok with it.” (Athlete)

Many athletes have also had the opportunity to travel:

- “The experiences I’ve got, just from going to different places...I wouldn’t have got that if I wasn’t involved in Special Olympics, so although competing is probably top of the list, just the experiences of going to different places, seeing different cultures, engaging with different people, you can’t really put a price on that.” (Athlete/Coach)

For coaches, club administrators and other volunteers

Like the athletes, these volunteers described a variety of personal and professional rewards:

- “Working with Special Olympics has made me a far better coach, it’s totally changed my approach to how I teach people.” (Coach)
- “We’ve seen over and over again, mums and dads standing at the finish line with tears streaming down their face when their athletes come across the finish line and they’re awarded a medal – that never diminishes, you always get a lump in your throat when you see that happening...It’s a big motivating factor for those who volunteer with the clubs.” (Volunteer)
- “The volunteering means more than I can say, because before I started it I was a very sad little person, very depressed and often crying, with no meaning in my life, and no purpose, so this has given me that.” (Volunteer)

For families

A range of different types of positive impacts on family life were mentioned, from creating a sense of 'normality', to having a better atmosphere and more sociability at home:

- "It just normalises life, and... and a funder's not going to give you money so that one parent can say 'it makes our life more normal' ... but when she came back [from competing in the World Games] she had all these stories to tell, and everybody was interested to hear them, and giving her normality, 'cos other people come back [after being away] and tell their stories about where they've been and what they've done and what they've achieved so why shouldn't she..." (Parent)
- "They became more...ahh, sociable. They would talk to their parents – they had nothing to talk about before, there was no communication, but because they'd maybe even been down south for a competition, or even abroad, some of them, they might talk about what they'd learned over there, what they'd seen, what type of food they'd had... but they would talk. The levels of communication would be much improved." (Coach)
- "I feel more relaxed because [my son] is more relaxed, and he is relaxed because I am." (Parent)

Many of the families travelled to watch their athlete compete overseas, which they believed was a real benefit for family bonding:

- "As a family unit, that's a healthy thing to do and to share...Places that we've been to, that you would never consider without there being a Special Olympics competition." (Parent)

Summary



This research project has found evidence of many significant, lasting benefits from Special Olympics involvement. It gives people a sense of accomplishment and empowers them to reach their potential.

Athletes achieve their sporting goals, but also develop and mature as people, and learn valuable skills that help them find jobs or volunteer roles.

Importantly though, it's not just the athletes who experience positive impacts, but also their families, coaches, and other volunteers.

About the author

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