

# It's How You Play the Game

By Susan L. Fitzgerald

*"Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt."*

*Special Olympics athlete oath*

Name a sport and Brandon Strickler, of Verona, Virginia, has probably played it. From basketball to swimming, golfing to volleyball, roller skating to bowling, no activity is too challenging. That's not to say all of them have been easy either. Now 23, Brandon has participated in Special Olympics since he was 8 years old.

Ask his mom Patti and she'll tell you the journey has been well worth it. Born with Down syndrome, Patti thought Brandon might not ever play in even a half-court basketball game. Today full-court basketball ranks among his favorites. Special Olympics, she says, quickly taught her never to put limits on her son.

"You can't think about limits," Patti says to parents interested in having their child get involved in the program. "Let them progress at their own speed." She admits, though, that in the beginning, some games may be more difficult than others. "When he was young, some sports were really too hard for Brandon—such as bowling and basketball." But she says it's crucial that parents keep bringing their kids back.

"A lot of kids come in hanging their heads low, already feeling they can't do it," Patti explains. "But then they start to smile, encouraged by all the reinforcement from coaches and volunteers." It may take months or years, she says, but eventually, something clicks and the athlete experiences a feeling of major accomplishment.

No matter how big or small, Patti tells parents that as long as their child is taking one step forward, celebrate it as an achievement. The triumph is felt by all involved—fellow athletes, parents, coaches, volunteers, even spectators. It's this camaraderie that makes Special Olympics special. Self-esteem and confidence don't get much bigger boosts than succeeding at something previously considered unattainable.



## About the Program

Founded in 1968, Special Olympics is a year-round international program of sports training and athletic competition for children ages 8 and older and adults with mental retardation. Once you decide to get involved, the possibilities might seem endless. More than 15,000 Special Olympics games, meets and tournaments are held in both summer and winter sports in communities worldwide, with more than 2,400 contests taking place throughout Virginia.

Special Olympics Virginia (SOVA) is the state program of Special Olympics Incorporated. SOVA's mission is to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with mental retardation, giving them continuing opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in the sharing of gifts, skills and friendship with their families, other Special Olympics athletes and the community. The organization's goal is to help bring individuals with mental retardation and other developmental disabilities (see criteria below) into the larger society under conditions whereby they are accepted, respected and given the chance to become useful and productive citizens.



## Who Can Compete?

Special Olympics training and competition is open to every person with mental retardation who is at least 8 years old and who registers to participate in Special Olympics. According to the SOVA Web site, a person is considered to be eligible to participate in Special Olympics if that person satisfies one of the following requirements:

- The person has been identified by an agency or professional as having mental retardation as determined by their localities;

or

- The person has a cognitive delay as determined by standardized measures such as intelligence quotient or "IQ" testing or other measures which are generally accepted within the professional

community in Virginia as being a reliable measure of the existence of a cognitive delay; or

- The person has a closely related developmental disability, which means having functional limitations in both general learning (such as IQ) and in adaptive care (such as recreation, work, independent living, self-direction, or self-care).

### Training for Life

For athletes, training begets life-long rewards. The SOVA Web site refers to a 1995 Yale University study that states Special Olympics athletes do better at school, at work and at home than their peers not involved in the year-round sports program.

SOVA calls it "Training for Life"—offering people with mental retardation the opportunity to become physically fit, develop cooperation and social skills, and increase their self-esteem, all while competing in an Olympic-type sports program.



### Games We Play

Athletes are placed according to age and ability level. Participants who finish first in their divisions are eligible to advance to state, national and international games. Special Olympics offers year-round training and competition in 22 Olympic-type sports. Virginia offers:

Basketball • Bowling • Equestrian • Golf  
Gymnastics • Ice Skating (Speed & Figure)  
Powerlifting • Roller Skating (Artistic and Speed)  
Sailing • Skiing (Alpine) • Soccer • Softball  
Swimming • Tennis • Track & Field  
Unified Sports • Volleyball

### Tailored Programs

SOVA also offers Unified Sports®, an inclusive program that pairs individuals with mental disabilities (athletes) and their peers without disabilities (partners) on the same teams to train and compete. Virginia offers Unified® programs in basketball, bowling, golf, sailing, soccer, softball, tennis and volleyball.

For athletes with severe mental retardation or multiple handicaps, SOVA provides the Motor Activities Training Program (MATP). MATP emphasizes training and participation rather than competition.

### Registering an Athlete

Registering an athlete with Special Olympics Virginia is simple. Just download the application for participation from the SOVA Web site, or obtain athlete enrollment kits by contacting the regional office closest to you.

### How to Volunteer

Thousands of volunteers power the continuing growth and success of Special Olympics. Special Olympics aims to match a volunteer's interests, talents and availability with applicable opportunities. To volunteer with Special Olympics Virginia, you must complete an application and screening form and undergo a background check. You can complete an online volunteer form or ask that more information be sent to you at [www.specialolympicsva.com/volunteer.htm](http://www.specialolympicsva.com/volunteer.htm).

## Find Out More

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