

PROMOTING INCLUSION FOR ALL THROUGH THE UNIFIED SPORT OF BOCCÉ

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Abstract

The 2015 Special Olympics World Games in Los Angeles coincided with the 25th anniversary of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), and served to promote the theme of "Inclusion for All." One of the key components within Special Olympics is Unified Sports. Unified Sports was established to enhance meaningful involvement within competition and social settings (e.g., social inclusion). Social inclusion was not ignored during these Games. The growth of Unified Sports within Special Olympics, since its inception in 1999, has been slow and steady. At the 2015 Special Olympic World Games, one of the better examples of this growth was evidence from the Unified Sport of Bocce. These Games showcased 34 partners from 20 countries in the Unified Sport of Bocce, a significant increase from previous competitions. Four short vignettes share the experiences of former athletes turned officials in a Unified Sport setting.

Keywords: *Unified Sports, bocce, intellectual disabilities, inclusion, Special Olympics*

Promoting Inclusion for All through Unified Sport of Bocce

The 2015 Special Olympics World Summer Games in Los Angeles, California (from this point referred to as the 2015 World Games) coincided with the 25th anniversary of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), marking an epical opportunity to promote human equality. The manifestation of ADA was to eliminate discrimination toward people with disabilities in work, communication, employment, and recreational/competitive sports. As Special Olympics Chairman Timothy P. Shriver advocated, "*the Special Olympics movement is a challenge to the world to recognize human giftedness, dignity, and value. It is a dignity revolution. It is a campaign for human equality*" (Shriver, 2014). The theme "Inclusion for All" has become a core vision for the 2015 World Games, especially in Los Angeles, the media and entertainment capital of the world. ESPN was the official broadcast partner, with three-hour daily and nightly coverage across the nine days of competition. There was a true sense of acceptance for the athletes with intellectual disability (ID) and recognition of accomplishment by these self-empowered individuals.

Unified Sports is an inclusive sports program within Special Olympics, and serves as a bridge between people with and without ID to promote social inclusion. Unified Sports

aids athletes from Special Olympics and athletes without disabilities (called partners) to be meaningfully involved through training and competition, while promoting friendships and understanding of differences (Special Olympics, 2014). The theme of "Inclusion for All" has been growing since the previous Special Olympics World Games resulting in an increased presence of Unified Sports. Unified Sports has increased 9% since the 2011 Special Olympics World Games in Athens, Greece. The 2015 Special Olympic World Games had a total of 13 Unified Sport competitions. Three sports: tennis, table tennis, and badminton were introduced for the first time in 2015. This increase echoes the promotion of inclusion and social acceptance, which fulfills the vision of the 2015 World Games. As a result of the growth of Unified Sports at 2015 World Games, a Unified Sports Competition protocol was developed to ensure meaningful involvement.

2015 World Games Unified Sports Competition Protocol

With the increase in participation, Unified Sports partners identified a concern related to competition and coaching. Coaches needed to create an environment that provided meaningful involvement by the athletes while supporting social inclusion. Thus, at the 2015 World Games, a Unified Sports Competition Protocol was developed that focused on resolutions to minimize risks of poor quality of Unified Sports competitions (Special Olympics, 2015 April). Coaches, Heads of Delegations (HOD), and officials met to establish and define meaningful involvement as a primary objective prior to and during the 2015 World Games. Several sports were discussed relative to athlete involvement, logistics, rules, team composition, and equipment. Any violation of meaningful involvement (athletic or social) could result in penalties and sanctions by Unified Sports Evaluation Committee (USEC). Examples of penalties could be re-division if a team's composition promoted athlete dominance due to a disparity in ability levels in the field of play. The USEC could also issue a verbal and/or written warning or call for a forfeit of the competition if subsequent violations occur following any warnings. However, the sport of Bocce was viewed as a sport that would promote proper team composition and minimize thoughts of disparity in ability levels. Bocce was considered one of the sports that showcased the "Inclusion for All" theme.

Bocce Promotes the "Inclusion for All" Theme

Bocce was first developed in Italy and has been a part of Special Olympics competition since 1991. To date, Bocce has the third most active population of athletes, behind soccer and golf (Special Olympics, 2013). The basic principle of the Bocce is to roll the Bocce balls closest to the pallina (target ball).

At the 2015 Summer Games, the sport of Bocce had 279 athletes, with 40 teams (including 19 as Unified Sports or approximately 48%), coming from 96 countries, which ranked sixth in athlete population of 25 sports. The beauty of the sport of Bocce is its inclusive format allowing different abilities on the same team. Athletes with visual impairment (VI), or who were hard of hearing (HoH), or with physical disabilities (e.g., cerebral palsy and using a wheelchair or clutches) were welcome to compete on a Bocce team. Accommodations for those with VI include the use of a cone as a target pallina. A bell being rung by an official on the court could also be used as a pallina for those with VI. Bocce is highly recommended to be inclusive of various abilities and age groups in school and community-based settings (Cumiskey, 2013; Toohill & Entwistle, 1999). However, Unified Sport Bocce teams were not historically well represented. In the 2007 Games at Shanghai, China, there were only four partners, and at 2011 Games in Athens, Greece, there were two Unified Bocce partners. There was significant growth in Unified Sport Bocce teams at the recent 2015 World Games. The 2015 World Games showcased 34 partners coming from 20 countries in the Unified Sports Bocce games. This increase in training and competitions also added benefits of expanding social contact, problem solving, and self-confidence, which boosted respect for people with ID promoted by Toohill and Entwistle (1999).

The Fantastic 4

The following section will highlight four profiles called the “Fantastic 4” that had meaningful involvement not as athletes but as volunteers and officials for the Unified Sport of Bocce. Their stories are further examples of a Unified experience supporting “Inclusion for All.”

Athlete Officials: Niki Glover

One of the distinctions in Special Olympics is that athlete officials are recommended in sports competitions. Niki is an example of an athlete turned official for the sport of Bocce and was invited as a technical official to the 2015 World Games. Niki said, “Inclusion for me means being treated as anybody else.” She comes with a partner/mentor, Linda Groves, and they officiated together during the 2015 World Games. Niki has officiated as a Bocce referee at the local Fall Classic in Nebraska every year since 2010 and also served as a Bocce Technical Official at 2010 and 2014 National Games. Her goal is to independently officiate at the World Games. Witnessed by the lead author, Niki provided a heartwarming moment as she performed the duty of head referee (e.g., making decisions of calling sequence of play). Overall, she was satisfied with her accomplishments and appreciated being given the opportunity to officiate at the top level of the 2015 World Games. Following her officiating duty at the 2015 World Games, Niki will return to coaching Bocce and officiating in her local chapter and is hoping to attend future Special Olympic World Games again as a referee to work with different senior Bocce referees.

Son/Volunteer and Father/Referee: Jimmy and David Kropp

Jimmy, a 17-year-old boy with Down syndrome, served as a flag official in Bocce competitions. His father, David, has seen his confidence increase since working with other officials. As a former Bocce athlete in State Games, Jimmy only wanted to work with his father. His outlook changed when another technical official from Trinidad encouraged him to try working with other officials (See Figure 1). In the officials meeting, David made an announcement to all officials that Jimmy was available to support them on court. Several responded, and Jimmy worked for the first time without his father as his partner. Working with others created an opportunity for Jimmy to be a part of the competition in a role which was new to him, while creating a sense of inclusion for others. By agreeing to take Jimmy on their officiating team, both the officials and Jimmy experienced equal status. Jimmy’s father, David, was thankful that Jimmy has become more involved in Bocce beyond his role as a former athlete. As the competition continued, Jimmy gained confidence and became more comfortable in his surroundings. He stated, “being a Bocce support staff with other people gives me a feeling of being needed.”



Figure 1. Jimmy with the green shirt, holding the flag indicating next throw. Photo by David Kropp

Father/Partner and Son/Athlete Duos: Team USA Unified Bocce

The 2015 World Games marked the first time USA Unified Sports teams had two father/son duos in the Bocce competition (personal communication, Finnstrom, 2015, July 28). Both fathers, Alan and Joe, are in their 70s; they witnessed the positive impact of Special Olympics sports on their sons, Alex and James. Alex grew up in Portland, Oregon playing traditional Special Olympics sports (e.g., basketball, softball, and bowling). Given the format of Bocce competition (i.e.,

singles or teams) each father/son team developed its individual skills and teamwork during practice rounds in their home sport clubs. The 2015 World Games provided the opportunity for these father/son duos to showcase their talents on a larger stage. Their coach, Brian Jacobsen, believes that Bocce is not just a sport that rolls the ball in the backyard but a physical activity that builds close relationships and mutual trust between players. The specific bonding between father/son relationships is another proof that Unified Sport Bocce is recommended to be a lifetime recreational activity between family members and promotes a unified setting within families. Both father/son pairs won the bronze medal in the Unified Bocce Doubles Division (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. USA Unified Bocce Team: Alan and Alex Gustafson (first two from left to right) and James and Joe Volpert (remaining two). They won two bronze medals in Male Unified Doubles Division. Photo from Special Olympics Oregon

Athletes and Partners: Team Chinese Taipei Unified Bocce

The Unified Bocce team from Chinese Taipei was composed of eight players; four athletes and four partners, with average age of 17 from two different schools. The coaching philosophy of the Coach Hui-Zhen Peng, who works for a national special education school in Taiwan was shared with his team: *“We are not primarily going to compete for gold, but all of you deserve a chance to play sports and to achieve your full potential.”* The message that the coach delivered to his athletes and partners underscored the importance of universal access of sports and the spirit of *“Inclusion for All.”* In addition, partners were told to be true teammates rather than field coaches. A Special Olympic athlete stated, *“I like the high-fives and determined look from my partner; this makes me calmer for the next play.”* She continued to support the Unified team composition by stating, *“To be honest, I love to enjoy the moment spent with my partner much more than just going to practice on my own.”* Through the eyes of the athletes and partners, these high school-aged players have demonstrated friendships and the nature of respect in human-

ity; everyone being equal. The Chinese Taipei Bocce Unified team won a total of four golds and two silvers in Bocce Unified Doubles and Teams Divisions at the 2015 World Games.

Inclusion Movement Needs to Keep Going

“Exposure to, familiarity with, friendships among people with and without intellectual differences is the secret for change,” stated Special Olympics Chairman Timothy P. Shriver. This statement highlights the key to inclusion for people with ID. Unified Sports has increased the emphasis on inclusion and has been conceived as an attempt to expand its range of influences, promoting more diverse participation in different facets of the Games (Hassan, Dowling, McConkey, & Menke, 2012). Bocce, is a lifetime recreational activity that allows for varied athletic functionality, utilizes simple rules, requires minimal supervision and equipment, provides ample opportunities for decision-making of tactical shots, and is easily understandable for everyone (Toohill & Entwistle, 1999). The sport of Bocce presents a format that allows for an inclusive team composition and should be considered for inclusion in more general physical education classes (Davis, 2011).

Without the implementation of ADA in the last 25 years and the efforts of Special Olympics in the last 47 years, inclusion of people with disabilities would not be as accepted as it is today. The accomplishments of the 2015 World Games go beyond the medals and awards; many of these athletes demonstrated to mainstream society that they can function as teammates, volunteers, and officials despite their disability. Unified formats need to continue to be embraced in other sports. *“Inclusion for All”* needs to be more than a slogan from Special Olympics, it needs to be embraced as a way of life.



Figure 3. Unified Bocce Team Chinese Taipei, Athlete (left), Hui-Ting Sun, and Partner (right), Yi-Fans Tsai won a silver medal in Female Unified Doubles Division. Photo by Cheng-Chen Pan.

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ATHLETIC GRACE

NANCE LARSEN

Special Olympics International

Rhythmic gymnastics requires elegant symmetry and a flow of dance moves and athleticism. Oh, and don't forget to always point your toes! Gizela Billikova, a member of team Slovakia, has a beautiful lyricism that leaps right into an audience's heart. The petite, 32-year-old gymnast has the rare ability to pull people into her performance, keeping the audience on the edge of their seats with her passionate interpretations. Her emotional connection with the crowd



earned her two silver medals, one each in rhythmic clubs and all around, as well as three bronze medals in rhythmic ball, hoop, and ribbon. Club Arabesque is a gymnastic club run by Gizela's mother and sister, and is a labor of love for the family that has forged an incredibly strong bond between the trio. The program has as many as 12 to 20 students, ranging in ages 12 to 30 at any given time. Gizela is the school's shining star. Her love of the sport quickly grew moving from a student to helping as a teacher.

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