



Connecting Through Sports

By [Scott Suzuki, Esq.](#)

Scott Suzuki (in white shirt) has been a Special Olympics basketball coach for over 15 years.

The recent Winter Olympics reminded us that competitive athletics can bridge differences of many kinds. Special Olympics, which will celebrate its 50th anniversary this summer, has long understood that sports can be a powerful mechanism for social change. Through sports, we can experience the gamut of the human experience, from the daily grind of practice, to the soaring high of victory and the bitterness of defeat. Through sports, we can see that all of us, regardless of abilities, are really just fans.

Over the course of the past 15+ years, I have had the good fortune to coach athletes in Special Olympics Hawaii. I have been a lifelong sports fan and have always been amazed at how powerful sports can be in promoting social change. Take Jesse Owens outsprinting Nazis, Jackie Robinson stealing home, or even National Football League players taking a knee. Perhaps farther from the public eye, Special Olympics breaks down barriers every single day simply by providing people with intellectual disabilities an opportunity to play sports that many of us may take for granted.

Scott's team has won three Hawaii state championships.

Public schools in the U.S. are required by law to make "reasonable accommodations" to their sports programs in order to meet the needs of students with disabilities. When accommodations are not possible, would alter a sport in a significant way or bestow an advantage, it's suggested—but not required—that separate, fully accessible activities be put in place. Even with adaptive technologies, athletic opportunities are infrequent for people with intellectual disabilities.

When people think of Special Olympics, many think that it is a singular event. In fact, it is a year-round, competitive program for athletes and sometimes their unified partners. Special Olympics is increasingly focused on inclusive sports through its Unified Sports program, which brings 1.4 million individuals with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities together, worldwide, for football, basketball, volleyball and more. This summer they'll host the first-ever Unified Cup, with 24 inclusive soccer teams from around the world (16 male, eight female) competing for the title.

Since 2008, Special Olympics has been working with the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs to sponsor Unified Champion Schools, which are committed to creating supportive and inclusive school environments and to preparing students to be change agents within their communities. Over 4500 of these schools participate in Unified Sports.

Athletes develop friendships and self-confidence through sports.

Despite our differing abilities, the path to a championship is the same regardless of the level of play. Success takes hard work, team building, talent and passion. I am still coming down from the high of winning a gold medal at the SOHI Holiday Classic in October of 2017. Our team was comprised of a mix of beginners and veterans, adults and youths, diverse socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic origins and people at different stages of their lives. Where else but sports will you ever see that?

Sports also help people develop friendships and self-confidence. I am thrilled to see my athletes off the court as they participate in so many other opportunities provided through the Special Olympics program. For example, here in Hawaii, SOHI sponsors a Global Messenger Program, through which individuals with developmental disabilities learn leadership and speaking skills in order to share their personal stories at public events.

Sports can be the ultimate icebreaker, enabling greater acceptance and involvement. Whether competing or cheering others on, we instantly connect with one another—opening so many possibilities.

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