

Frequently asked Q and A on Unified Sports

Q: What is Unified Sports:

A: It is a joint program between Special Olympics NJ and the NJSIAA to bring together people of similar age, with and without intellectual disabilities, to play on the same team. These teams are made up of young people who either do not get the chance to play for their schools' teams, or don't participate in varsity sports but still want to be involved in interscholastic competitions.

Q: What is the difference between an "athlete" and a "partner"?

A: The Unified athlete is the team member who has an intellectual disability and the Unified partner is the team member without a disability.

Q: Is there any special equipment needed for the Unified athletes?

A: No – the Unified athletes need to be able to perform the basic fundamentals of the sport unassisted by others. For example, in Unified Bowling, special ramps cannot be used, in Unified basketball no wheelchairs are allowed.

Q: What about equipment modifications for the Unified sports?

A: There may be some equipment modifications that are specific to that particular sport- for example in Unified soccer the goals are smaller, in track and field the shot put is lighter.

Q: What Unified sports is the NJSIAA sponsoring in the 2019-2020 school year?

A: NJSIAA along with SONJ is sponsoring basketball, bowling and track and field championships. This year in basketball for the fourth year in a row, there will be a Unified Championship game at the NJSIAA State Tournament of Champions at Rutgers University. Bowling and track and field will be included in the NJSIAA State Tournament. It will be determined at a later date at which level the Bowling and the Track and Field Tournament it will take place based on the number of teams involved. In 2019-20 schools may compete interscholastically in soccer during the fall season, but the NJSIAA will not be sponsoring an NJSIAA Championship in soccer.

Q: What are the requirements for the students to be involved in Unified sports?

A: If your school is planning on competing on the interscholastic level all of the Unified athletes and Unified partners must meet the same NJSIAA guidelines as any athlete who is competing on a school team. Both the Unified athlete and the Unified partner must meet all of the NJSIAA standards for athletes, for example age, physical exam, steroid testing, etc.

Q: What about coaching requirements?

A: Again, if your school is competing on the interscholastic level the coaches must meet the same NJSIAA guidelines as your school's coaching staff. They also need to complete the NFHS free course on "Coaching Unified Sports". The Unified coaches also need to complete the NJSIAA Coaching Principles course.

Q: What restrictions are there for varsity athletes to be part of the Unified program?

A: At this time, to encourage the growth of Unified sports, we will allow varsity athletes to take part in the Unified sports program. There are restrictions on their participation, varsity athletes cannot take part in any Unified program in which they have lettered in, and for example a varsity bowler cannot also be on the Unified bowling team at your school. Nor can an athlete with a disability who has competed as a varsity member of the school team be a Unified athlete in that sport. A varsity athlete in another sport is eligible to be a Unified partner in a sport. For example a varsity athlete in soccer can be a Unified partner in track and field.

Q: What about an athlete who is on the same sport roster – can they be a Unified partner in that sport?

A: Again, because we are trying to encourage the growth of the Unified program at this time we will allow non varsity (usually freshman and JV players) who have not achieved varsity status (have not participated on the varsity level) to be Unified partners in that sport. For example, in track and field, a member of the team who has not taken part in any varsity event can be a Unified partner in track and field.

Q: What is the role of the Unified partner?

A: They are an equal teammate to the Unified athlete, the partner is not there to serve as a coach or a volunteer. They are there to compete with the Unified athletes as equal partners on the field of play.

Q: Will other sports be added to the Unified program in the future?

A: The goal of the NJSIAA/SONJ Unified program is to continue to add sports to the Unified program and to eventually host Championship Tournaments very similar to the NJSIAA State Tournaments.

Q: On the NJSIAA sorts participation forms I see that columns have been added for Unified Sports, I am not sure how to answer.

A; You should list the number of Unified sports participants, both Unified Athletes and Unified partners that will be participating in the Unified sports tournaments as members of the Unified team ONLY. For example if you have an athlete who meets the guidelines to be considered a Unified athlete BUT only plays on the schools' Varsity sport team, they should not be listed.

Q: Who do I contact if I have additional questions?

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