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Special Olympics

A study of potential opportunities to foster leadership
and personal development within participants

by

Adam Ward

Senior Project
Jepson School of Leadership Studies
University of Richmond
April, 1996
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SENIOR PROJECT

Jepson School of Leadership Studies
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Richmond, VA

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Introduction

The idea for my senior project was born out of a struggle. I had tinkered with several thoughts regarding potential projects, but I was not eager to dedicate myself to something toward which I felt little passion.

When Dr. Hickman mentioned the possibility of examining the opportunities for leadership among Special Olympics athletes, I was intrigued. In high school I donated time with The Miriam School, which catered to special-needs students. For my service learning project in the spring of my junior year I had the opportunity to work in the Special Education classroom of Three Chopt Elementary School - a class that included between ten and twelve students with varying degrees of mental and physical challenges. This background provided a foundation that, coupled with one of my true loves - athletics, led to Special Olympics becoming the perfect topic to study for my final Jepson project. My project will examine Special Olympics itself; how it works, and the current benefits for athletes. I will also seek to examine what, if any, strategies Special Olympics uses to encourage, foster, and develop leadership among the athletes. If found lacking in this area, I will propose ideas and a plan of action that will enable this development to happen.
Background

According to the most widely accepted definition by the American Association on Mental Retardation (AAMR), an individual is considered to have mental retardation if the following two criteria are met: significant limitations exist in two or more adaptive skill areas and the condition is present from childhood (18 years or younger). Adaptive skills are daily living skills needed to live, work and play in the community. The new lists includes ten such skills: communication, self-care, home living, social skills, leisure, health and safety, self-direction, functional academics, community use, and work (Special Olympics International Fact Sheet). It is estimated by the World Health Organization (1994) that 156 million people in the world, and 7.5 million in the United States, have mental retardation.

The Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation was established in 1946 with two major objectives: to improve the way society deals with its citizens who have mental retardation, and to help identify and disseminate ways to prevent the causes of mental retardation. Interestingly enough, the mission is "to provide leadership in the field of mental retardation and service to persons with mental retardation, both those born and unborn, and their families" (Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation Information Package).

In 1968, Eunice Kennedy Shriver organized a track and field competition for individuals with disabilities. Since that time, Special Olympics has spread to more than 100 countries and provides year-round
sports training and competition to over two million athletes in 23 sports with
the help of over 500,000 volunteers. Special Olympics International is
sanctioned by the United States Olympic committee, recognized by the
International Olympic Committee and is the largest year-round sports
organization for children and adults with mental retardation. In the United
States, competitions are held on the community, state, and national level.
These regional games culminate in international games every two years,
which are patterned after the Olympic Games and alternate between summer
and winter sports.

The mission of Special Olympics International is as follows:

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 a sharing of gifts,
skills and friendship with their families, other Special
Olympic Athletes and the community. (Special Olympics
Fact Sheet)

The philosophy behind Special Olympics is that it is founded on the
belief that people with mental retardation can, with proper instruction and
encouragement, learn, enjoy and benefit from participation in individual and
team sports. Special Olympics believes that through sports training and
competition, people with mental retardation will benefit physically, mentally,
socially and spiritually; families will be strengthened and the community is
united in further understanding people with mental retardation in an
environment of equality, respect and acceptance (SOI Fact Sheet).
Special Olympics International does not see their movement simply as athletic contests. They believe in integration as the proper way to incorporate people who have mental retardation into society and they view the competition as a viable way to accomplish this task. One of the goals for this organization is to help bring all persons with mental retardation into the larger society under conditions whereby they are accepted, respected, and given a chance to become productive citizens (SOI Fact Sheet).

Literature Review: Special Olympics

The idea behind the Special Olympics is that the sports programs enable individuals with mental retardation to develop physical skills, fitness, self-discipline, self-respect, friendship, and a sense of personal satisfaction through competitive and recreational experiences (Single, 18).

The concept of inclusion, upon which the Special Olympics bases its philosophy, has received a great deal of attention recently. Lipsky and Gartner, advocates of inclusion, attempt to describe the differences between the two viewpoints on inclusion. “Inclusion is the provision of services to students with disabilities, including those with severe disabilities, in their neighborhood schools, in age-appropriate regular education classes, with the necessary support services and supplementary aids.” The goal of the inclusion process is to prepare students to participate as contributing members to society (Lipsky and Gartner, 36). The authors feel that inclusion has developed a reputation as “dumping” special needs students into regular
classrooms. Inclusion is not a new label for “mainstreaming”, which was an educational philosophy and practice that worked on the premise that there were two systems - regular education and special education - that could usually only be integrated in non-academic settings (Lipsky and Gartner, p. 36). Inclusion is happening on a more frequent basis in many areas, and is thought by many experts in the field of mental retardation to be the best way of handling people with mental disabilities.

Carlos Oberti, the father of a child with Down Syndrome, believes that the most important issue surrounding inclusion is that of self-esteem. “We must realize that many of the social problems our society faces today are as a result of poor self-esteem in individuals who never had the environment or the opportunities to develop a healthy appreciation of themselves” (Oberti, p. 19). He feels that expectations in a non-inclusive environment tend to be low, and the possibility for the child to get out of that “self-perpetuating” environment is narrow - leading to an “endless chain of placements that often taxes society” (Oberti, p. 19).

In an article by Ballard and Calhoun, the authors cite three ingredients of the Special Olympics that are vital in the personal development of the athletes. The first element is the large time commitment that the Special Olympics require. A survey of Special Olympians revealed that the average time of beginning training sessions was nearly eight and a half weeks before the competition, and that the average training time lasted more than 3.5 hours per week (Miller, 244-249). The second element is that the benefits of
training include the opportunity to gain social and language skills as well as physical motor skills (Orelove et al, 325-329). The final ingredient is the positive motivating force that the Special Olympics provide. Claudine Sherrill suggests that positive, successful experiences carry over into the classroom, home, and workshops. The competitions exist to “give competitors the feeling of being an athlete rather than a retarded person” (Sherrill, “Adapted..” p. 475).

Ballard and Calhoun claim that these three elements combine to offer an important opportunity to extend student learning. They outline specific academic activities (art, math, reading, listening, health) that combine education with the Olympics.

An article that was published in the journal Mental Retardation conducted a survey to examine the attitudes toward Special Olympics of 41 experts in the field of mental retardation and 40 parents of Special Olympians. The authors felt that the Special Olympics were a particularly rich subject for study in that it appeared to straddle the fence between the two major schools of thought regarding normalization. “Its purpose is to engage individuals with mental retardation and other disabilities in sports and recreation experiences similar to those offered to people without mental retardation. Its purpose is to make the lifestyle of participants more closely resemble that of the larger community, where engaging in sports is common behavior” (Klein et al, p. 16). The first school of thought believes that individuals with mental retardation should participate in activities with other people who have
mental retardation, so as to give them positive experiences and opportunities for success with people similar to themselves. The other school of thought is that people with mental retardation should participate in the larger community, so that they will be better prepared for a contributing role in society. Klein points out that the Special Olympics has involvement in both of these areas.

In general, the findings of the survey included the following results; most experts (85%) agreed that Special Olympics is a beneficial program. They noted the opportunities for recreation, and the effect it has on self-esteem and confidence of participants as well as increasing community understanding of people with retardation. A few criticized the failure to become integrated with the normalization movement. Most of the parents said that the program achieved their expectations and none had the intention of withdrawing their child. Some found the program too competitive and/or too large to give individual attention to the athletes (Klein et al, p. 19).

Family respondents also claimed that the Special Olympics helped their children see that there are others that have difficulties like they do and that has helped them accept themselves. The parents were pleased with the program because it had brought pleasure to their child.

In response to the previous study, another article was written in the same journal two years later. The author, Wolf Wolfensberger, a staunch anti-inclusionist, brings to light several problems that he perceives are present in regard to the Special Olympics. The first is the problem of image
degradation. The Special Olympics are featured in the “Metro” section of the paper as opposed to the Sports page, the games that he has witnessed are crawling with clowns and clownery motifs, which reinforce the cultural tendency to see retarded people as clowns and objects of ridicule. The image was not enhanced when a judge ordered part of Tonya Harding’s fine to be paid to the Special Olympics.

In addition to the image problems, the Special Olympics suffer from the sheer congregation of so many stigmatized people. This congregation can create obstacles even in situations where much social integration is going on (Wolfensberger, p. 129). He also attacks the position that Klein (1993) takes in regard to “choice” (the choice of retarded persons to engage in segregated activities and settings). Wolfensberger feels that this “give them what they say they want” philosophy will eventually lead to the logical (perhaps extreme) endpoint of helping people with mental retardation kill themselves (Wolfensberger, p. 129). In his mind, simply catering to the whims and desires of people with mental retardation will lead to acting in a way that is contrary to the best interests of the individual. The theory of inclusion, as set forth by Klein, is found to be lacking by Wolfensberger.

In defense of the experience that the athletes have during the Special Olympics, a correspondent to the New York Times discovered experiences that benefited the individuals. While observing at the national games, the reporter found that the moments that the athletes have alone with teammates and coaches in the dorms - where they are allowed to create a
“psychic home away from home filled with friends” - are at the core of the Special Olympic experience (Martin, B1). This experience of forming a home while away at the Games gives athletes the chance to develop long-lasting friendships, improve social skills, mature in confidence, and thus feel more comfortable and be more successful in all social situations.

In a paper based on over 300 interviews with Special Olympic athletes, Claudine Sherrill proposed that the three main problems faced by the Olympians were the same as with any other minority groups; stigmatization, stereotyping, and prejudice (Sherrill, “Social...” p. 22). She claims that there are three different broad theories that explain how the Special Olympics help the athletes overcome these problems. The first, motivation theory, says that the Olympics give athletes the challenge of competition, enjoyment, and love of sport. The second, participation theory, claimed that participation gives birth to self-concept.

The third, social learning theory, is a theory of behavior that takes into account intrapersonal and environmental determinants. This theory, as outlined by Kreitner and Luthans (1991), is based on the fact that we acquire much of our behavior by observing others within a social context (Steers and Porter, 1991). According to social learning theory, the behavior of individuals and the environment influence one another. “Inherent in this complex social equation is the reciprocal influence of our behavior, our cognitive processes, and our social environment. Sometimes individual behavior prevails, at other times the environment prevails. Meanwhile, people
perceive, judge, choose, and exercise a measure of self-control" (Steers and Porter, 1991). In other words, the theory claims that socialization can occur through sports for the athletes. The Special Olympics, and the interactions that occur between coaches, volunteers and athletes therein, can model behavior that is proper, and assist in developing that behavior in the lives of the participants. The three theories were examined in the light of research that Sherrill had collected.

Richard Kraus, a noted author in the field of recreation for the mentally retarded, gives several principles to keep in mind when selecting activities that will involve people with mental retardation. Included on his list are the following:

1. The mentally retarded have the same basic needs as other individuals for self-respect and a feeling of accomplishment.

3. Retardates tend to have a short attention span; activities should therefore be diversified and have a time limit determined by the behavior of the individuals taking part.

5. The mentally retarded usually do not respond well to "talking about" an activity but learn better from direct participation.

7. Recreation can serve as an important stabilizing factor in the lives of the mentally retarded and should be organized in an orderly fashion, following a familiar schedule.

8. While the leader may have other social or educational goals in mind, activities must provide fun and a sense of enjoyment for participants. (Kraus, p. 180)

It is clear that the Special Olympics is not a new area when it comes to research. However, there is nothing to my knowledge of any studies
examining the leadership of the athletes themselves and what can be done by
the organizers to encourage and foster this leadership.

**Literature Review: Role of Sport in Development & Leadership:**

In addition to research about the Special Olympics in general, a study
needs to be done about sports and how they pertain to personal development
and whether or not leadership can be fostered and taught in a sport setting.
Scott Zimmer, a Leadership Studies major who graduated in 1994, wrote his
senior project on whether or not participation in athletics imbues leadership.
I have used his study as a springboard for thought as well as tapping into his
valuable sources.

The first question that I will address is whether or not athletics can
“build character” and help in the social development and maturity of
individuals who participate in sports. Earle Ziegler (1964) gathered
information that would serve as philosophical foundations for physical
recreation. Included in that information was that Harold T. Freirimood, the
former United States National YMCA Secretary for Physical Education, felt
that two objectives of physical education were: “1) personality adjustment
(learning to live with self and others), and 2) development of responsible
citizenship and group participation” (Zimmer, 1994). Similarly, Wilton stated
that athletic participation will help “to encourage proper moral and spiritual
growth” (Ziegler, 1964 quoted in Zimmer, 1994).
Sanford, Bergstrom and Lozoff conducted research and concluded that participation in athletics "can favor development of the whole person" through teaching individuals to be self-critical which is "very important in the development of people" (Sanford et. al. quoted in Zimmer, 1994). In addition, Larson, Spreitzer and Snyder (1976) examined both the long-term and the short-term effects that athletic participation had on children age 12 and under. Their results found that "athletic participation has a positive perceptible socialization effect continuing into adulthood" (Larson et. al. 1976 quoted in Zimmer, 1994). The final word from this particular viewpoint that finds athletics as a positive element in human development will come from a task force from the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). This group conducted a study in 1988 that found that, "it is clearly evident that physical education and sport are not confined to physical well-being and health, but also contribute to the full and well-balanced development of the human being" (McCormack and Cholip, 1988 quoted in Zimmer, 1994).

While there has been a good deal of research and theory that would support sports as helping to develop individuals in a positive manner, there is also a conflicting school of thought. Robin Vealey (1992) believes that while athletics may be capable of developing or modifying certain personality traits, they have their negative side. Vealey feels that athletics reduces prosocial behavior (helping and sharing) and increases rivalrous, antisocial behavior (Horn, 1992 quoted in Zimmer, 1994). In addition, Stevenson (1985)
studied socialization effects of sport on college athletes and concluded that, "there is little research to suggest that participation in college athletics has any effect on character" (Zimmer 1994).

Zimmer analyzes the data and concludes that "participation in sport and athletics cannot by itself imbue leadership, or at the very least, it is not something that can be reliably measured" (Zimmer, 1994). He sides with Sheehan and Alsop (1972) in regard to his belief on the correlation of leadership and sport; "....regarding personality characteristics - that sport is a vehicle not for the teaching of leadership, but rather for the display of already developed leadership characteristics" (Zimmer, 1994). I will not take issue with his conclusion, however I believe that combining this research with the subject of people with mental retardation will result in a whole new paradigm. People with mental retardation have had little or no opportunity to develop the characteristics of leadership that sports are simply supposed to reveal, according to the research. I believe that the Special Olympics, through the medium of competition and an athletic setting will provide a fertile ground with which it will be possible to develop leadership and responsibility among the athletes.

The Project:

My journey began at the central (main) office of the Virginia Special Olympics in downtown Richmond. The first person that I spoke with was Mike Baum, the director of public relations. Mr. Baum was an excellent
source, as he had a necessary understanding of every aspect of the Special
Olympics. He provided background information on the Olympics, as well as
pledging to put me in touch with individuals who could help provide the
information and insight that would help in the advancement of the project.
In addition to this, he introduced me to a concept that the Special Olympics
was beginning to develop: Unified Sports. "Unified Sports is a pioneer
program that combines approximately equal numbers of athletes with and
without mental retardation, of similar age and ability, on teams that compete
against other Unified Sports teams" (Special Olympics Fact Sheet). This
program was introduced about five years ago, after extensive testing in the
field, and the sports that are currently involved include basketball, bowling
(by far the most popular Unified event), distance running, soccer, softball,
volleyball, and cycling, with several others currently being tested.

Mike Baum also provided some additional literature about the Unified
program, which explained that Unified Sports is necessary because it "expands
sports opportunities for all athletes and dramatically increases inclusion of
persons with mental retardation in the community" (Fact Sheet) (italics
added). Special Olympics felt a need to become more than just an
organization that brings people with mental retardation together to compete
against one another. By forming this wing of their organization, they were
answering both their critics (i.e. Wolfensberger) and a desire of their own to
increase the inclusion of people with mental retardation into society.
This revelation that Mike Baum gave to me in the form of the Unified Sports program threw an obstacle in the path of what I had hoped to do for this project. I had hoped to analyze the Special Olympics, find it lacking in some area, and propose one or more solutions. I could not have come up with a more practical idea than the Unified concept. Therefore, I resolved that part of my project would take on a new task; evaluating the Unified program. I want to examine both how it works in theory and in practice, as well as potential leadership opportunities on behalf of the athletes that might be available. I will talk to organizers, coaches, and players, if possible, and form a model for how this program will best work.

The next person that I spoke with was David Thomason, one of the organizers of the Virginia Special Olympics who is based out of the main office. The first thing that Thomason gave to me was the results of a study that was just completed by the Yale University School of Medicine. The survey, which was printed in the "Journal of the American Academy of Adolescent Psychiatry", examined 104 athletes at the world games in Salzburg Austria in 1993. The participants ranged in age from 9 to 37 and had IQ ratings between 40 and 78. The study concluded that Special Olympic athletes perform better at school, at work and at home the longer they participate in the year-round program (Valenti, 1995). The study compared athletes who were active in the Special Olympics to a control group of people with mental retardation who were not involved with the program. The study found that the length of involvement with the Special Olympics was the greatest
predictor of social competence (the ability to live independently, hold a job, participate in community activities, etc.) - more important than IQ or age (Valenti, 1995). One of the directors of the study, Elizabeth M. Dykens, Ph.D., claimed that, "the results of the study show that, in addition to the physical benefits of the Special Olympics, the program offers a vehicle for social integration and accomplishment among its active participants" (Valenti, 1995). Daniel J. Cohen M.D., the other director of the study, concluded that, "this study offers new insight on how Special Olympics provides an opportunity for athletes to develop their social growth" (Valenti, 1995).

Eunice Kennedy Shriver, Honorary Chairman of Special Olympics International, in response to the study said that, "for parents who are looking for ways to enhance their children's developmental growth, this study suggests that athletes who participate in Special Olympics acquire important skills that can help them gain employment, maintain relationships, function independently, and contribute to community life" (Special Olympics Fact Sheet). This is in agreement with what was established during the literature review on the Special Olympics; that regardless of whether or not sports can contribute to the social development of people without mental retardation, that sports can contribute to the development of people with mental retardation. Thomason said that the survey was evidence of what people involved in Special Olympics have known all along; that the program benefited the whole person. "There will be people with no self confidence, no ability, and certainly no leadership qualities enter the program and it is easy to
see the difference", between the person that entered Special Olympics and the person who leaves (or never leaves!).

Thomason also talked about the thought process that is behind the Unified Sports concept. He feel that Unified helps foster an attitude of understanding on both sides (partners and Special Olympians). He said that the reason that Unified came about was due to a need that Special Olympics perceived. “In a perfect world, Special Olympians wouldn’t need this, because they would be able to play in all leagues, everywhere.” He feels that an important aspect of Unified that oftentimes is overlooked is that the partners and the athletes must be on similar athletic levels. This eliminates many problems that would occur if the partners were more skilled, such as the hesitation of partners to do their best, and the possibility of a subtle patronizing attitude.

Thomason then introduced me to all of the new programs that Special Olympics was promoting under the title of Training For Life, which will search for ways in which Special Olympics can help its athletes social development by a more practical means. This program, made up of three areas, will try to assist in the athlete’s personal development as well as improving work life and relationships.

He then explained the three areas upon which Special Olympics is beginning to place a great deal of time and effort as a part of the Training For Life program. The first program is the Unified Program, about which we had already spoken. The next is the Sports Partnership Program, where schools
with substantial numbers of individuals with mental retardation form teams and practice and compete alongside the school's corresponding interscholastic team. The final area is the Partners Club Program, where an individual or a group "adopts" an athlete and meets with them for several hours a week in order to train together.

Doug Single wrote an article in which he details how each of the two (excepting Unified which has and will be further discussed) new programs play themselves out in the practical. In the Sports Partnerships program, "training and competition are supervised either by the team's head coach in a particular sport or an assistant coach specifically assigned to coach the Special Olympics teams. Athletes without disabilities from existing sports teams serve as peer coaches, scrimmage teammates, and boosters during competition....they (Special Olympics athletes) wear school uniforms, ride the same team bus to competitions, participate in, and are recognized in school sports awards ceremonies and qualify to earn school athletic letters" (Single 1992). The teams play Special Olympics teams from other schools when they compete interscholastically.

In the Partners Club program, sanctioned school clubs are formed to provide volunteer peer coaching to Special Olympic athletes. The purpose, according to Single, is for Partners Club students and Special Olympians to, "appreciate the value and strengths of each other as individuals. A bond of friendship and respect is developed, and the intrinsic rewards are limitless for both partners and athletes" (Single, 1992).
Thomason also spoke of a program entitled Athletes for Outreach, wherein Special Olympic athletes go through a class and are taught to speak about the benefits that they have received from Special Olympics in order to eventually speak in front of groups and at fund raising activities.

Observation:

On the weekend of March 24, I had the chance to go to the Virginia Special Olympics Basketball Championships that were held at various venues in Hampton, VA. I spoke with Jeff Arritt, the director of the tournament, about what exactly would be taking place during the weekend. In order to accommodate the entire spectrum of Special Olympians, four different levels of basketball would be taking place. The first level that Mr. Arritt mentioned was the "skills competition". This activity is designed for Olympians who have such severe disabilities or personalities that playing in a team format is virtually impossible. The skills competition consists of the athlete (with the help of a partner) performing several basic basketball moves, such hitting a target with a pass, making a shot from short distance, and dribbling at a high rate of speed. This activity fits the stereotype of what many people envision when they think of Special Olympics; a volunteer leading an athlete through each event. These activities have been shown by the research to improve confidence, self-esteem and give the Olympians a chance to succeed in athletic competition. However, the opportunity for leadership on behalf of the athletes in this scenario is limited at best.
The opportunity for leadership and responsibility on behalf of the athletes does come into play in the other three areas of basketball. The Virginia Special Olympics hosted a three-on-three, half court competition, as well as five-on-five, full court competition. These activities were supplemented by the Unified division, which will be discussed later. The three-on-three and five-on-five competition gave the Olympians a chance to work on skills that can only be refined in a team setting, such as cooperation, selflessness, discipline, and sacrifice. Each team had a coach, but while the action was taking place, they had nothing but each other to lean on. The three-on-three competition that I was able to witness was an excellent example of what the Special Olympics tries to provide for its athletes.

The game that I watched pitted two teams of about five or six members, with three being on the floor at all times. One team was made up of men in their late twenties and thirties, along with a very frail looking woman, who might have been in her late forties. The other team was made up of three young boys around the age of ten, and two girls in their late teens. The teams were of reasonable skill, but the most fascinating element to observe was the interaction that took place between the players. The younger team appeared to have a player to whom everyone gave the most respect. This player gave some verbal instructions to her teammates, and was the player that the team turned to when a key performance was needed. The other team had no such player, but appeared to cooperate well together, as the players took on equal roles. Unlike the basketball that is usually seen in the present times, the
players all demonstrated excellent sportsmanship, respected the judgments of the official, and showed courtesy to the other team.

A particular incident took place in the game that exemplified the way in which the team concept, when executed properly, can benefit the participants. It came time for one of the young boys to come out of the game. He had played an appropriate amount, and played fairly well. The problem was that he simply had no desire to come out of the game. His substitute came in and explained to him that it was his turn to go out. When this tactic did not work, the substitute walked around him, placed both hands on his back, and began to push. The player, even with this "help", did not budge. While this was going on, another player on the team tried to gently reason with him that everybody takes turns and it was simply his turn to not be in the game. This effort, although noble, proved fruitless. At this point, the coach walked out on the floor, gently whispered in the boy's ear, gave him a big hug, and they walked, arm in arm, to the bench. Minutes later, the game ended and players from both teams lined up for the post-game handshake. There was no great exultation over victory, and no frustration over losing. The young man who had been so stubborn about leaving the game gave everyone, on both teams, a post-game hug. It is easy to see that this game had none of the negative elements that can be associated with sports (including increased selfishness and rivalrous behavior), and that the players were able to work on things like teamwork, cooperation, and following the rules - all of which are necessary in order to be a contributing member of society. In
addition, opportunities for leadership were clearly evident. Any time that a
group is formed, such as a team, opportunities for leadership will come about.
In this case, one of the young men, instead of simply standing by and waiting
for the coach or official to handle the matter of the "belligerent substitute", he
tried to reason with his friend. Instances such as this will present themselves
each and every time that a team steps on to a field of competition, and by
allowing the players to try and handle them, the coaches are giving the
athletes a chance to either practice leadership, or develop skills that are not
already present.

The other competition that I was able to witness was the Unified
competition that was held at Kechoutan High School in Hampton. The
Unified competition combines Special Olympic athletes with "partners"
(people without mental disabilities) together on the same team. At the time, I
had very little understanding of how the Unified teams functioned, and I was
anxious to see them in action. In particular, I was curious as to how the
partners would play - would they take it easy? would they play to win?
would they take all the shots?

My preconceived notions came crashing down as I walked into the
gymnasium and took my seat. Within seconds of watching the action, a
player gathered in a long pass, bounced the ball once, and began his ascent.
He dunked the ball so hard that the basket was still shaking as the teams
proceeded down to the other end of the court. As the crowd reacted to what
just occurred, two thoughts came to me; 1) this is a much higher level of play
than I expected, and 2) the particular player that amazed the crowd with his athleticism must have been a "partner". As the action continued, I realized that my first thought was correct, as the teams battled to the end in a game that was filled with a highly skilled level of play. However, when I talked to the coach, Mike Ludwig, after the game, he explained to me that the two players who caught my attention with their skills (including the aforementioned skywalker) were Special Olympic athletes. He also revealed that the ratio of Special Olympic athletes to "partners" was around 3:2 on his teams.

Ludwig, who serves as the vice-chair of the Peninsula Area Special Olympics in Hampton, actually is the coach of all three Unified basketball teams that were participating at the State Championships. I had a chance to talk with him after the game and he revealed how he came to be involved with the Unified concept. Several years ago, he was a coach for both a Special Olympics team and a recreational league team made up of high school and college age players who did not play for their respective schools. Since he was the coach of both, he came up with the idea of scrimmaging the two teams against each other. He found the two teams to be near the same level of talent, and when he heard about the Unified Sports concept, he thought that he was the perfect person to form a team. "The first thing that I did, though, was to sit down the guys on the rec-league team and talk to them about the idea", said Ludwig. He wanted to be sure that everyone was on the same page as far as goals and expectations. It was a unanimous decision to form the
Unified team. Since that time, more people have come out for the team (he even mentioned the possibility of me playing on a team), and he currently coaches three Unified teams, all of the same age and skill level.

Ludwig felt that, as the Unified program is intended to do, both sides (partners and Olympians) were benefiting from playing together. He felt that his rec-league players learned the value and uniqueness of the Olympians, and that the Olympians improved socially and skill-wise from having participated on the same team with the partners. Ludwig, in my mind, stands as a Burnsian transformational leader - raising all of the followers to a higher moral plain. He singled out one player, a Special Olympian, who had come to the team with very little skill and very little confidence in his life. Ludwig said the improvement that he had seen in this player’s skill and social confidence had been remarkable and that this change would not have happened so quickly, if at all, without the Unified concept.

As I watched the Unified basketball games take place, I was impressed with the fact that, skill-wise, I could not tell the players apart. As David Thomason mentioned, this is one of the most important aspects of the Unified concept. There was only one team member with a visible handicap, and as Ludwig pointed out who on his teams were Olympians and who were partners, it was interesting to note that the players socialized together, and not just in partner only or Olympian only groups. It was clear to me that the Unified Sports program, in this case, was successful in its stated goals.
On April 14, I was able to witness a Unified softball league that took place on the south side of Chesterfield County in Richmond. Special Olympics had two fields at a park, and had two separate events going on at each. On one field was a skills competition, similar to the skills competition that took place at the basketball championships weekend. The Olympians, who were all of reasonable skill, participated in a softball toss, batting competition, timed run around the bases, and a fielding contest. The other field hosted a Unified softball league game. The level of skill was certainly not as high as in the basketball game that I witnessed, but Special Olympians of all ages combined with partners (in this case children or adults) to have an enjoyable game. This game had several people with physical handicaps as well, but the coaches and/or partners helped a young man in a wheelchair around the bases and helped two young girls run.

I spoke with Marjorie Loya, the director of Unified Sports in Chesterfield, and the central region's "Coach of the Year" for 1995. She said that the strengths of the program were twofold. First is the fact that family members can serve as partners. Whereas before in the lives of their children (Little League, etc.) the parents could not participate, Unified gives them the opportunity to compete alongside their children. She said that in particular, fathers were "thrilled" to finally have the chance to play with their children. The other strength that she perceived was the coaching that took place. In softball, if the numbers were ideal, she was able to alternate batting order and field position between partners and athletes, giving the athletes a coach on
each side of them at all times. This situation is suited best when the athletes are not as skilled or more severely retarded.

According to Loya, the weaknesses of the program are also twofold. The first is the lack of partners. Oftentimes, an athlete will come with a partner (i.e. family member). However, when several members from a group home living facility participate, there is a need for adult partners that is not usually met. The second problem is that she has had partners who may have been a bit too focused on winning as opposed to competing. She said that they caught on once she got a hold of them and, "calmed them down". She also mentioned the problem that the highest functioning potential Special Olympics athletes tend not to be a part of Special Olympics. I will address this in the conclusion.

Loya, who also works as a middle school special education teacher, has seen the lives of athletes change for the better on a regular basis. She recalled one young man who was suffering from depression and very down on himself. Once he became involved in Special Olympics, she said, his entire attitude toward school and relationships changed to a positive outlook. "He was finally given the opportunity to compete and succeed against people who were dealing with the same problems he had", said Loya. In addition, Loya feels that some athletes have taken on leadership roles on the teams, but that this was as a result of having been taught for many years about skills and strategy. They build on their knowledge base and then are able to help out new players as they come into the program. Once again, Special Olympics is
the first chance that the athletes have had to practice and develop leadership skills.

Loya felt that the Unified program works best with athletes who have mild retardation. “They understand that they have a disability”, she said, “and they don’t like it.” Special Olympics levels the playing field that, up to this point, had always gone against the athlete. Currently, the Unified program is growing steadily in Chesterfield, with softball and bowling (whose participation has doubled in the last year) the most popular sports.

Conclusion:

When I began this project, it was with very little knowledge of how Special Olympics operates. When I thought of Special Olympics, the image of a partner-and-athlete track meets that many people volunteer to help out with came to mind. The way that I thought the project would go was far different that what actually occurred as my work came to a conclusion. I thought that I would find a dinosaur organization that I could quickly apply some bits of leadership theory to, and make some recommendations on potential improvements. Instead I found a very progressive thinking organization with ideas far beyond any that I could have come up with in just one semester of work. At this point, I am going to analyze what works for Special Olympics, and what might make it better.

What the Special Olympics needs to do, first and foremost, is figure out a way to make the outstanding programs that they have introduced (Unified
Sports Program, Sports Partnership Program, Partners Club Program) work. I am concluding that each of these programs give Special Olympians a chance to develop personally as well as give them a chance to either practice leadership skills or begin to develop them. David Thomason said that the Partners Club Program is not currently underway at any Virginia venues. In addition, the Sports Partnership Program is experiencing mixed success in Southwest Virginia as well as parts of Northern Virginia.

Obviously, these programs are in their early years, but increased awareness of schools, youth groups, and recreation centers is necessary if these ideas are to reach their potential. I feel that the Partners Club Program, in which students train together with the athletes, has a far greater chance of success that the Sports Partnership Program (where a high school team “adopts” a Special Olympics team). Judging from my own high school athletic experience, it is much more reasonable to expect an individual to spend several hours a week with an Olympian in training, rather than a high school coach taking the time for his team to practice with a Special Olympics team. The problem is almost inherent; coaches, and therefore teams, in high school play to win, and Special Olympics teams play for the benefits of competition. These two do not easily mix.

Another problem is that the majority of schools do not have enough potential Special Olympians to field a team that could play interscholastically. Since Thomason told me that special education students in a large area are usually sent to one high school, these high school need to form a coalition
and begin to schedule interscholastic contests. On those same nights that these contests are scheduled, the varsity teams (since high school schedules tend to have some freedom) could play one another. Therefore, the varsity teams could still be involved in terms of support and travel, and the accomplishments could still be recognized by the school in terms of letters and awards. Special Olympics needs to actively be the initiator of these coalitions if this program is to meet its potential.

I feel that the Partners Club will be successful once more people find out about it. I was not ignorant of the Special Olympics when I began this project but I had no idea that this program existed. Special Olympics needs to consider a massive awareness campaign and get everyone from community center directors to school guidance counselors (or whomever runs the community service aspect in high schools) involved.

The two Unified events that I have seen stand as a model for how this program should work. On one hand (basketball), there was no visible difference between the talent levels of partners and Olympians. On the other (softball), athletes who have not been given a chance anywhere else are now becoming successful. This program will continue to expand and change the lives of those who participate.

In addition, the Athletes For Outreach program, wherein an athlete takes a speaking class and learns to speak on behalf of Special Olympics, provides athletes a chance to stand in front of a group and speak of their experiences. This (public speaking) is a tactic that the Jepson School obviously
feels is important in training leaders, as we have been required to do this in virtually every class we have taken, by design. This program needs to be furthered by encouraging athletes who are capable to explore this opportunity for awareness.

Currently, if someone wants to become a Special Olympics coach, a training program must be completed. The first level of the training is a general session, which provides a general background on Special Olympics guidelines and mental retardation. Next, the prospective coach attends a coach's school in that sport and then participates in a 10 hour practicum training athletes. After this is completed, the coach is eligible for certification. I submit that a brief overview be given about the opportunity for personal development during the general session. In addition, I recommend that the subject of athlete leadership be dealt with for team sport coaches. For many of the athletes in a team setting, this will be the first opportunity that they have to be a leader and practice leadership qualities. If no leadership qualities are evident, the team concept provides a perfect chance to begin their development. In addition to coaches, I would like partners to go through an abbreviated training session in order to introduce them to these concepts and to make sure that everyone (partners, athletes, and organizers) is on the same page.

Finally, an area that was mentioned by several people needs to be addressed. Both Loya and Thomason felt that the most qualified people to help Special Olympics are people who have a mild retardation, but are still
capable of fully participating in society. These particular people (some having moved on from Special Olympics, some having avoided them for fear of stigma) have a tremendous potential to help Special Olympics. Thomason mentioned the fact that some athletes had gone through the coaching certification process and become coaches themselves. There could not be a better example of raising up leaders from within than having a former athlete become a coach. This needs to be actively pursued by officials in regard to athletes who could handle this challenge.

I feel that much headway has been made in the lives of people with mental retardation by Special Olympics. By increasing awareness of the programs, forming coalitions to facilitate the programs, and actively recruiting people with mild mental retardation to help their operation, Special Olympics will become a model for everyone in the personal development of their athletes, as well as presenting unique leadership opportunities for their participants.
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