

## The Message Of Inclusion Boston Iacobazzi



An inclusive sport is any physical activity or recreation, that is also known as accessible recreation, that incorporates the concept whereby people with disabilities are given the opportunity to participate in those activities with individuals without disabilities. Also known as unified sports, these programs are offered to individuals of any ability and skill level making them an option of physical activity for virtually anyone and everyone. Inclusive sports are available to people all across the world and have several organizations that promote them further. Additionally inclusive sports are related to many other inclusive programs such as workplaces and classrooms that incorporate the diversified concept. These sports programs are created for the athletes that feel excluded from the traditional sports of high school and recreational facilities, yet want to have the same experiences. The inclusive sports concept is to partner those with intellectual disabilities with those without them to satisfy that exclusion and create long lasting connections. Although inclusive sports give individuals with disabilities and experience they otherwise may not have, some people argue that they do not provide a physically fair or skill centered competition. With all of these things in mind I will be conducting interviews and using multiple sources for research to figure out if inclusive sports and other inclusive activities promote a beneficial ideal or do they rather hinder the experience of participants?

The first form of an inclusive activity that was created was the beginning of the Special Olympics movement. In the early 1950s and 60s as well before then, people with any sign of a disability were shut away from the world and hidden. Eunice Kennedy Shriver, the sister of former president John F. Kennedy was a major instigator of the beginning of inclusion. Eunice's sister, Rosemary, was born with an intellectual disability and her parents wanted to "fix" her by putting her through a lobotomy. The effects of the lobotomy made her condition worse. This was a common treatment of individuals who anything different with their abilities. Eunice saw how her sister had been mistreated and ignored and she wanted to improve the lives of not just her sister, but anyone with a disability who had been through a similar experience of. In June 1962 Eunice Kennedy Shriver opened an innovative summer camp for people with intellectual

disabilities (ID) at her home in suburban Washington D.C. being one of the first programs specifically focused on inclusion of persons with disabilities. Over the next few years Shriver would work her hardest within politics to create a large-scale athletic event for those with ID. On July 20, 1968 the first international Special Olympics Summer Games were held at Soldier Field in Chicago organized by the between the Kennedy Foundation and Chicago Park District.

Over the next decade the message of Special Olympics spreads throughout the entire world and into other areas besides sports. Music albums are made to spread awareness of those with disabilities, police officer fundraisers are started, and the olympics are broadcast on television for the first. In 1989 this is marked as the beginning of their unified sports initiative bringing those with and without disabilities together. In May 2000 the first Global Athlete Congress takes place, putting individuals with and without ID in charge of talking about the future of Special Olympics and putting them in a position of leadership together. In 2001 Special Olympics creates Get Into It, a program that is designed to form an inclusive classroom for both individuals of all abilities to work together and learn. The class promotes embracing differences and encouraging them to be the difference and help spread inclusion. At the first Special Olympics games only about 1000 athletes from the United states with disabilities participated in Chicago and today, 50 years later, there are over 5.3 million athletes and unified partners who take part in over 108,000 competitions across 170 countries.



The idea of including those with disabilities in everyday activities has expanded from one woman's backyard to a global movement where more than millions of athletes can participate. In recent studies conducted by the researchers of inclusive sports, it shows many beneficial facts about the Inclusive sports initiative. The main purpose of the sports program is to give an opportunity for athletes with disabilities to play and develop skills and out of all athletes who are asked if the program has helped them improve their abilities on the field or on the court, 94% of them said they had. Another goal of Unified sports is to help individuals gain confidence and help those without disabilities understand them better. 79% of teammates without disabilities who played on inclusive sports programs say that they have a better understanding of those different from them, 81% of all the athletes who play say that they believe their school has become a more welcoming environment, and 65% percent of parents say that because their children participated in an inclusive event their expectations of their child have risen. All research conducted shows that inclusive programs have a very large impact on the lives of those who are involved in a physical way and more importantly in an emotional way.

There are those who argue that these inclusive sports have no real advantage and only hinder the athletes that participate in them from reaching their full potential. One coach from Tooele High school says that “By having Partner Athletes (those without disabilities) play on a inclusive team, it prevents them from being their best and makes them restrain their true ability.” While interviewing him, the coach went to say that even students with a mild disability are forced to play at a lower level and that it reduces the amount of true competition in the sport. In my own experiences with activities that promote inclusion I have seen its effects. At many high schools including my own their are mixed levels of support by the student body at their games and events, with some students gaining a lot of understanding and other's gaining frustration.

Inclusive activities and sports have been shown to provide a beneficial experience for those who participate and many people promote the expansion of programs similar to it. However, there are also some who find that inclusive sports have already run their course and are not needed. People find differing opinions on unified sports and similar programs because of their view on the effectiveness of the exaggerated emotional encouragement of the participants, the differing levels of physical abilities yet all athletes are forced to play on a standard level, and because of the amount of money that is used to fund programs such as Special Olympics.

Despite some people arguing that inclusive programs for those with disabilities are not needed anymore, inclusive sports should be expanded to even more activities and areas of society because they provide a method to find healthcare and physical activity for individuals who may have difficulties finding them, they promote a positive and encouraging atmosphere for everyone who participates in them, and because they act as a gateway for inclusion to spread into other aspects of the world where discrimination has become common.

Inclusive programs in athletics and in schools should be expanded because they provide assistance to those who struggle finding it most of the time. As I have been involved in many activities organized by Special Olympics I have met with many different families of people with and without disabilities. The parents of Natalie Green, a soccer player who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, said, “Without Special Olympics [Unified Sports] my daughter would not be able to walk, let alone be physically active and in good shape.” These inclusive sports are some of the only opportunities that are provided for athletes across the world with disabilities to get active and stay healthy. Many doctors also support inclusive activities and can provide options for families with a disabled family member to find appropriate healthcare for them. Another athlete who I worked with while assisting with Special Olympics was a young man in high school whose family had been going through a rough time and was forced to live at the homeless shelter. This young man began to get sick and gained weight and was told that he needed to find someway to exercise, yet the gym classes at the school were full of people who bullied him and he refused to go. .His only way to get the help he needed was through the inclusive soccer team at our school. He joined the team and started to get healthier once again. He also moved on to competing in higher level sports and eventually played for a famous inclusive sports team in Utah, adding joy to his tough life.



Inclusive sports provide a very physical aspect in their programs but they also provide a very beneficial emotional environment. This is specifically shown in the positive atmosphere that is provided for all participants in the programs. One of the statistics from the Special Olympics Unified sports fact sheet said that 82% of the athletes that participated in Unified Sports ended with a much higher self-esteem. This statistic itself shows that just being involved in these sports can change someone's outlook on themselves and on life from a negative perspective to a positive one. The athletes that participate in unified sports and other similar programs do so because they feel left out and misunderstood but participating in these sports helps them gain a more positive attitude. And the positivity is not just limited to the athletes with disabilities, the partner athletes that have no intellectual disabilities also find a much happier lifestyle and setting after joining these types of programs. One partner athlete from Hillcrest High school, Moises Gonzalez, said in an interview that, "I used to try and play on the traditional boys high school soccer team, and every single time I tried out the sport was always about winning and not about playing the game. However, when I joined the inclusive team at the school I learned that this program sent a message that everyone wins. No one is left out and there is little intense pressure and is focused on a fun time!" Partner athletes like Moises share the same emotions and experiences across the world. The atmosphere that inclusive sports creates is not one of high stakes and brutal competition, but it does create one that centers on comradery and still maintains a friendly competition which is what sports are all about after all. Not only does having these types of programs help with emotional and physical troubles of athletes of disabilities, it also takes the role of something that can break down social stereotypes of all types of discriminations not just that of disabilities.

The main goal of Inclusive sports is to help those who are frequently excluded from everyday activities and although that is commonly those who have intellectual disabilities, it also

spreads to other forms of discrimination such as race, gender, religion, and age. Special Olympics, and other inclusive programs, provide training and activities for athletes of all ages from 8 through the rest of their lives. And by spreading to over 170 countries, these programs reach athletes of all races and ethnicities and religions. I have met people from all over the country and world who have different skin colors and spiritual beliefs but being in the inclusive setting makes all of those differences disappear and creates a very welcoming environment. With these many differences all being included in the overarching programs of inclusive sports, it creates a standard that begins to overlap into other groups that have been disenfranchised. With having one type of program that overlaps into so many other global dilemmas, it becomes something that needs to be shared and expanded.



Although the majority of people who have been involved in inclusive programs agree that it is a type of program that should be encouraged and expanded there are those who still believe that these programs are unnecessary because people with disabilities have different capabilities and cannot perform on the same level, it forces those without disabilities to lower their standards, and a sporting event is a competition and not a humanitarian idea. These few people's arguments are very flawed. Even though people with disabilities may all perform at different levels, an intellectual disability is not the only kind of disadvantage a person could have while playing the sport. Every single person in the world has some sort of disability. Some may not be able to move a limb, while others may not be able to respond socially appropriately, and there are even those who just chew with their mouth open. But it is true that everyone has a disability and everyone needs to adjust depending on who they are. And perhaps the participants without disabilities may have to lower their playing abilities to compensate for their teammate, this is not a bad thing. It allows for a better understanding of the spirit of the sport and creates a comradery that can only be achieved in this specific athletic setting. Sports may also have a major focus on competition and winning in their nature, however they also a major part of the world culture and have a huge impact on the world. By using sports to send the message of inclusion, it does turn sports into a humanitarian cause, but it also delves into the competitive roots and finds a deeper meaning of what being competitive really means. So there may be some who argue that inclusive programs are waste of time and money, however, when looking closely at these programs

specifically affect the world there is no doubt that they should indeed be expanded in different ways.

Over the past few months of researching and being a part of the inclusive world I have found that programs such as Special Olympics' Unified Sports initiative are a need in the world and must be expanded. When over 5.3 million individuals participate in a program that changes the lives, physically and emotionally, of everyone who participates in them it is something that needs to be continued. People who participate in these programs get a better chance at find assistance when they need it, they are able to be apart of a genuinely kind environment in the midst of sometimes cruel world, and for these programs to also serve as a bridge for other groups to become included are all reasons why Inclusive programs need to be continually fought for so they can send a true message of inclusion.



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