



READINESS FOR COMPETITION - A GUIDE FOR COACHES

Competition is one of the biggest elements of sport. Many people get involved in sport in order to participate in competition. To create a positive experience, it is important to make sure that every athlete is really prepared for competition before they enter.

It is easy to be lured into the world of competitive sports by the dreams of representing your club, region or country, by the glitter of medals or even just because it is what everyone else is doing. But, before you and your athlete consider entering a competition, there are some really important things you should consider.

COACHING HINT NUMBER 1

The first, most crucial and probably last thing we would naturally think of considering is whether the athlete understands the concept of competition.

Research has shown us that it is only from the age of 11 or 12 years that children start to understand the meaning of effort and ability. Although there has been little research undertaken in this area for people with intellectual disability, it is likely that in many cases, this happens at a later age.

Before this age, children usually rate their own performance by comparing themselves to others. If they win or beat many opponents, they feel they have done well and are competent and successful. Conversely they feel or that they are no good at their sport if they come last (regardless of who their opponents are – age, ability etc). From about 12 years upwards, they start to understand that they can play to the best of their ability and still not win, or that they can win without playing all that well.

As coaches, we need to be aware of this and of how our athletes view competition before we consider entering our athletes into any formal competitions. Entering an athlete into competition before they are ready can mean they are unprepared and have unrealistic expectations. This can result in them feeling a very real sense of failure. Competition then becomes associated with negative emotions, the last thing that any coach or parent wants to see happening.

However, this does not mean that all competitive activities should be avoided for younger children or even for adults who have not yet developed this capacity. What it does mean is that as coaches, we should carefully consider which competition opportunities are most suitable for our athletes – on an individual basis.



Practical Tip

Introducing athletes to competition within the safety of a club environment allows you to observe closely how they deal with a competitive situation. You introduce simple competitive elements in an informal manner, with games with 3-4 simple rules. Games of chance, cooperative games and games against the clock are recommended. Young children, while they generally do not understand the concept of competition, work best in team activities with a small number of simple rules. In this informal way, you can observe their understanding of competition and their readiness to accept what it may bring and to cope with all that competition will throw at them. In addition, it will help you to identify what areas need to be focused on in preparing them for further competition.

COACHING HINT NUMBER 2

Is your athlete prepared to win ... and to lose?

Anyone who has participated in any competitive activity knows the elation and joy of winning and the deflation of losing. Our athletes must be ready to accept that no one can win all the time and in addition, be able to recognise the successes in those events where we do not win; the personal bests, the well executed free kick, the great steal, the successful bunker shot. Before your athlete enters competition, they must understand that some days we win and some days we lose and have the ability to take the small victories and successes out of the events where they don't bring home the gold medal.



Swimming legend Ian Thorpe is a man who thinks in the right way!!!

"... losing is not coming second. It's getting out of the water knowing you could have done better. For myself, I have won every race I've been in."



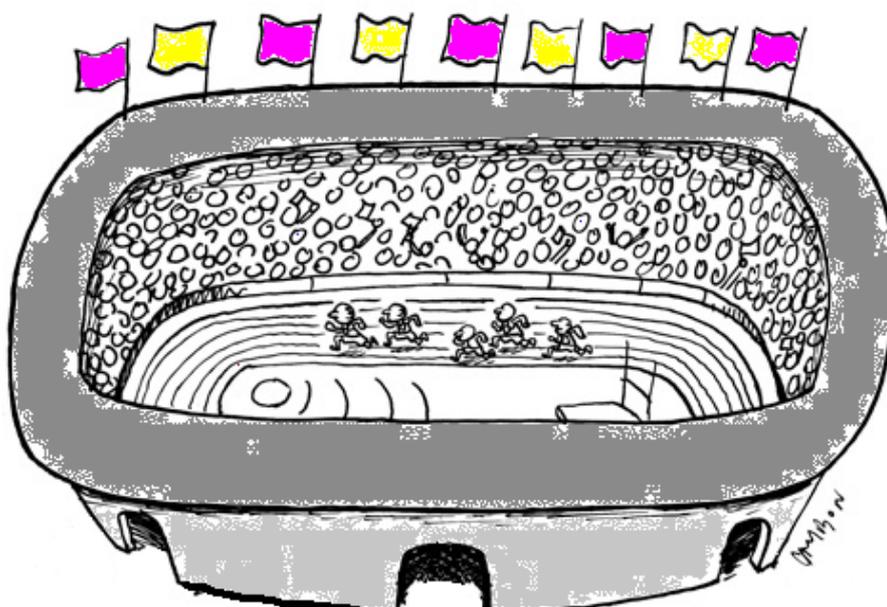
Practical Tip

As a coach, you can help your athletes in this, by emphasising individual achievements. For example, you could set targets for your football team to keep possession of the ball for at least 5 consecutive passes, or for your badminton player, that at least 60% of his serves are legal, or a personal best target on the track. It is important that these goals are achievable and realistic and that you celebrate and praise when athletes reach these targets, just as much, if not more than you would celebrate a gold medal.

COACHING HINT NUMBER 3

Is your athlete ready for the roar of the crowd?

Competitions are about a whole lot more than just doing the event. There are the busy dressing rooms, the large staging area full of unfamiliar faces, the walk from staging to the competition start point. It will probably be a strange venue with volunteers your athlete has never met and you won't be the referee or judge like he/she is used to. There will be check in, staging and awards. There are a lot of new things an athlete is faced with. You must be sure that he/she is ready for this.



Practical Tip

You can help them with this by simulating a competition environment at training. Invite parents and siblings along to your training time to make up your cheering spectators and create a mock competition. Kit everyone out in their competition uniform, invite a coach from a neighbouring club to attend as a referee or official – this will give you an opportunity to see how your athletes react to competition- who excels? Who gets nervous? Who needs a pep talk before they go into staging and who just needs a little bit of space!

You should also consider keeping a record of your athlete's performances in training. This will help you to identify when they reach a level of consistency in their performance, when they improve and even to highlight when something is amiss if their performance disimproves.

COACHING HINT NUMBER 4

Can your athlete complete their event safely / correctly?

This sounds basic, but many athletes are entered into events for which they cannot perform the required skill/routine or for which they do not know the rules. We do a great disservice to our athletes when this happens.

Put yourself in their shoes. You arrive into the competition area. You don't know the other athletes around you and your coach is not beside you as normal. There are lots of people watching, expecting you to perform well, maybe even to win. Even when you know exactly what you need to do and are confident in your ability ... it can be daunting But if you don't know your routine or can't remember the rules this is likely to be a very stressful, and possibly even threatening or upsetting experience for you.



No one is expected to be perfect, least of all at their first competition, but as parents and coaches, we owe it to our athletes to ensure that they are as prepared as they can possibly be to enter competition and have a quality experience. There is absolutely nothing wrong with deciding an athlete is just not ready. It does not have to be all about the medals!



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COACHING HINT NUMBER 5

Is your athlete able to compete in their event?

– Does this sound strange? It might do. Of course Special Olympics is all about participation and inclusion, but Special Olympics competitions are about competing! An important consideration when entering an athlete into an event is whether there will be anyone to compete against. There may be several reasons why there might be no one for your athlete to compete against

- 1. No one of a similar age or ability** participating in the sport/event
- Although your athlete can complete their event correctly, they complete it in a time that is **significantly slower** than any other athlete in the competition.
 - While they should be commended for having trained and developed the ability to complete this event, this is nevertheless not an appropriate event to enter them into a competition. Competition is about racing/competing against other athletes. If your athlete's ability is such that there will be no other option but a single person division, then this is not competition.
- 3. No other athletes** participating in the event
 - It may be frustrating if your athlete has trained hard and progressed in their training and taken on the challenge of a new event, to find that he/she has no one to compete against. It is important to consider what the priority is for your athlete: to experience a true competition or to simply perform the event? In some events, the first level of advancement competition offered is at regional or even Ireland level. When this happens, it is done, not to deprive athletes of competition opportunities, but to ensure that athletes have a quality competitive experience.



Practical Tip

Select events with your athlete. The events your athlete enters should be selected based on a combination of his/her interest, ability, your ability to coach and the available competition. If any of these are lacking, it is important to tackle the issue to help ensure your athlete has the best preparation possible.

For athletes with a high performance level, it may be worth considering providing them with some supported opportunities to enter mainstream competitions. Consider making contact with your local mainstream club and discussing with them how best you might introduce your athlete to mainstream sport; this can always be done alongside their Special Olympics participation.

So what do you do when this happens and you realise your athlete is not ready?

Well, you can ...

1. **Be patient** – remember that the competition is about the athlete. A positive competition experience is much more important than an early competition experience. Every athlete will progress at his/her own rate. Allow them the time to develop.
2. **Involve them in interclub activities** where they will have an opportunity to experience the social side of sports participation and competition in a modified format.
3. **Simulate a competition environment** during a training session and observe how your athletes manage in that situation.
4. **Provide some additional coaching time** during the club session to help them with their skill/event
5. **Consider bringing in a coach** from a neighbouring club if you feel you cannot bring them any further? If that does not work, perhaps you could consider undertaking some additional training to help you progress them?
6. **Consider if perhaps this event is too much of a challenge** right now. Is there another event that might suit your athlete better (perhaps less technical/short in duration)?

As parents and coaches we should always make every effort to ensure that our athletes are prepared in every possible way for competition. Competition can and should be one of the most enjoyable, exciting and rewarding elements of participation in any sport. Achieving this means making sure our athletes are well trained physically, have the appropriate technical and tactical skills and also that they are mentally and emotionally prepared for the rigours of competition. In doing this, we can ensure that all of our athletes enjoy the wonderfully exciting and challenging experience that competition can be and a long and happy sporting career!