

# Special Olympics PA Competitions Opening Ceremonies Guide

**Special  
Olympics**  
Pennsylvania



Opening Ceremonies is one of the highlights of every Special Olympics event. The athletes look forward to it and it sets the tone for the entire day(s). Please use the following guide to ensure a festive, organized, joyful and athlete-focused/led Opening Ceremonies.

## **Timing:**

- Suggested length of time – 1 hour or less
- Whenever possible walk-through's should be done in advance
- For 1-day events (Sectionals or Invitational) OC should conclude before 10 a.m. to allow for full day of competition/travel.

## **General Practices**

- At least one athlete should be an emcee at every Opening Ceremonies and a part of leading/planning the event. SOPA aims to be at the forefront of athlete leadership and thus we want to embrace every opportunity to give our athletes roles that shine a positive light on their abilities.
  - Athlete participation and leadership should be front of mind in all facets of planning and coordinating an OC. Meaningful and inclusive participation.
- Less talking and more entertainment. This should be a celebration. It should be energized and festive. Athletes have told us that speeches are their least favorite thing about any OC.

## **Key Components of a Standout Opening Ceremonies (in the order they should occur)**

- Consider Pre-Ceremony Entertainment where appropriate. Examples include cheerleaders or dance team performance, a DJ playing music, students leading cheers, etc.
- Emcee Introduction + Welcome
- Parade of Athletes/Welcoming of Delegations – Assign several people to “own” this portion of the Ceremonies. Each location will be unique, but a standard plan should always be in place. Make sure all those processing in the parade are aware of the exact course (start, finish, etc.).
  - *Variations in the Athlete Parade:*
    - *For larger state-level events such as Winter Games, Fall Festival or Summer Games the Parade of Athletes precedes OC and during OC there is a smaller “Welcoming of Delegations”.*

- *At many Sectional and Local events the Parade of Athletes will actually be the Kick-off to the Opening Ceremony with the Emcee announcing each Delegation as they make their way towards the seating area.*
  - *Or other Sectional events athletes will parade in with their county sign and all gather in front of the ceremony, once all counties are called we will ask the emcee to “jazz it up” with another round of applause for all of the athletes where they all raise their signs up high and cheer (a “rah-rah” moment). Athletes will then need to be escorted to a designated location, either all together or back with their delegation.*
  - *And in yet other instances, a Bowling Sectional for example, 1-2 athlete representatives will be introduced at the beginning of OC, holding their county banner while making a lap around the venue.*
- A walk-through of the entire ceremony, with all key parties, is a key to a successful event.
- Music of some kind (live marching band ideal or utilizing loud speakers in gym/stadium) is also a must. Olympic Fan-Fare music or The Great American Symphony recommended.
- Be synergized. The emcee must be in sync with those leading the parade/intro of delegations. Make sure everyone knows the order (typically alphabetical) that the delegations will be processing and/or introduced.
- Be aware of the distance of the procession. For example if delegates are starting on one side of a large track and processing nearly a ¼ mile to the opposite end, this will create a lull and instead of serving as a festive kick off to the ceremony will become drawn out and anti-climatic. Keep the distance covered manageable and consider the time it will take to cover that distance.
- Find ways to lend energy and excitement to the parade. Entertainers, other athletes/students, a band, cheerleaders are all welcome additions to process in with our athletes.
- For events where delegates will carry their county banner, ensure you have representation from each county and communicate clearly to the banner carriers where they will take the banners (ie: their route) and when/where/how they will rejoin the rest of their delegation.
- National Anthem + Color Guard – As with any sporting event, starting off with the National Anthem (*sung live is always the best if possible – consider athletes who can sing it as well – it is fair to ask for a tape or to view an athlete singer in advance to ensure he/she is appropriate*) is expected. Bringing in a Color Guard to present the flag adds an additional nice touch.
- Invocation – Typically only done at State Events (Example, Father Peter at Villanova).
- Celebrity/Gov/Dignitary Welcome – Opening ceremonies is an ideal opportunity to ask 1-2 dignitaries to welcome athletes and say a few **brief** words. For example, a College President welcoming everyone to campus or a local Government official welcoming everyone to his/her city/county.

- Entertainment – Music, Dance, Performance – This event is about fun and energy – feel empowered to try creative things and more than one entertainment segment is ok as long as it doesn't run long.
- Special Olympics Representative Board or Senior Leadership Team member – Again, a few **brief** words to energize the athletes from either the Board or SLT.
  - Sponsor Recognition – OC is the ideal time/place to recognize donors. This can be done by any number of folks already on the agenda or in unique circumstances (large dollar Presenting Sponsor) a check might be presented or a donor would be invited to speak or be recognized. Donor banners will also often adorn prominent locales on site at the OC.
- Global Messenger – Even with an athlete or two in the emcee role, it is recommended to ask a different athlete to give a personal message about the competition about to be played and about Special Olympics in general (favorite memory of XYZ event, impact of SOPA on his/her life, etc). The speech should be no longer than 3 minutes and it should be upbeat and high energy.
- Oaths – An athlete oath, coach's oath and official's oath is a part of every OC. A representative of each group should do the honors. Copies of each oath should be provided and on hand.
- Entrance of the Flame of Hope (Torch) and Lighting of the Cauldron – Whenever possible the Torch should be brought into Opening Ceremonies with the help of Law Enforcement (SO has a worldwide partnership with Law Enforcement known as the Law Enforcement Torch Run for Special Olympics – LETR). When done right, this tends to be the highlight of Opening Ceremonies. Athletes and law enforcement should handle this jointly. A separate addendum to this guide will further detail best practices for the arrival of the torch and lighting of the cauldron. If the ceremony is entirely indoors, bringing a live flame into a building is often prohibited. If this is the case work with SOPA team on a Plan B.
- Declaration of "Games Open" – In most cases an athlete but sponsors/dignitaries also welcomed (or a joint effort) to officially "Open the Games" as the last act of OC. From there, competition can commence.
- Departure – Encourage music/marching band but this is not a performance. Consider the music at departure just another way to keep the energy up while folks file out.