

Requirements of World Games Athletes

Intro: Once every 4 years, Special Olympics athletes in the United States are given the opportunity to represent our country at the highest level of competition - World Games (respectively for Summer & Winter Games)! World Games are undoubtedly, one of the highest levels of privilege and opportunity for any Special Olympics athlete. In theory we would like to believe that consideration for selection for a World Games event should be afforded to every Special Olympics athlete. However due to many factors and considerations there is a need to better “screen” or “vet” athletes who are selected to ensure that each athlete, coach, management team member and volunteer can achieve the best experience possible.

Factors/considerations that make the World Games experience not only unique but challenging;

- Length of Games – the World Games experience can involve anywhere from 18-21 days. The length of time required depends on the location of the Games and the pre-Games experience. For many Special Olympics athletes, this length of time away from home can prove to be a challenge.
- Time Away from Parents/Family – Because of the structure of the U.S. Team, athletes chosen can expect to be away from their families for extended periods of time without seeing them and at times, with very limited contact. For some athletes this can cause stress and anxiety.
- Adjusting to New Coaches – Coaches selected for the U.S. Team come from all across the country and it is rare for a World Games athlete to already know one of these coaches. Can the athlete adapt to a new coach?
- Conform to the Group/Adaptability – In order for the U.S. Team to function well, all members must adhere to team rules and the team schedules. Often times this means that a sport team may need to adhere to a schedule as a group – meaning an athlete cannot direct his/her own schedule. In addition, there will be times when schedules change with little or no notice and athletes must be able to adapt accordingly.
- The Disruptive Parent – it is equally important that parents/guardians are comfortable being away from their athlete for extended periods of time and with limited contact. They should not expect “special” considerations for their athlete or for a particular situation. Parents/family members need to embrace and respect the U.S. Team rules and understand that their potential insistence to be involved with the team and/or their athlete could be very disruptive.
- Daily Living Skills – Athletes must be able to independently handle all toileting, showering and daily hygiene needs. Coaches can easily provide reminders to take care of these items but athletes must be able to attend to these needs on their own in an

efficient time frame. Athletes must be able to share living space with other team members.

NOTE: Coach to Athlete Ratio – The coach to athlete ratio for Special Olympics USA is set for each World Games by the host country Games Organizing Committee. In most instances, the ratio is one (1) coach per four (4) athletes. This established ratio means that if an athlete requires a significant level of assistance, there will be three other athletes receiving less supervision – this could lead to additional health and safety issues.

- Food/Diet – While accommodations are made for dietary restrictions such as diabetes, gluten-free, etc. special considerations should not be expected for “picky” eaters. Often athletes will dine in settings which involve planned meals served to the group and while there will often be choices, it will be limited. Or, the cuisine will be indicative of the country. There should be no expectations that special efforts will be made to provide certain types of food.
- Selecting Athletes Who Are Appropriate for the Sport and/or Events - Every effort should be made to ensure that every athlete being considered for selection has competed in his/her sport and the specific/identified events in that sport for at least the minimum required number of years and is also well-trained and ready for World level competition.
- Travel and Long Days – Most likely the distance required to travel to World Games destinations will be long and could require several days. Many times this travel will involve many modes of transportation; airplane, bus and train. In addition to the travel days being long, the actual Games days will be long as well. It is realistic to expect 12-15 hour days – can the athlete being considered handle this for an extended period of time? The general fitness of the athlete should be considered. Does the athlete have a general fitness level that will allow them to walk for extended periods of time over various distances, multiple days?

Each of the factors and scenarios are based on past Games experiences and are a true reflection of what a World Games trip will entail. It is expected that every state program will administer a vetting process that will allow the respective state staff personnel to make the most qualified decision about final selection of athletes.

Additional suggestions:

- Once nomination paperwork is received, each athlete should be vetted.
- If the athlete is known well-enough at the state-level and you already know an athlete has a history of behavior issues, is poorly trained, etc. And you know they are not qualified to represent your state program or the US delegation, do not move them forward in the process.
- If the state staff is not familiar with the athlete, please take the time to vet through conversations with the local coach, Area Directors and parents. While on the surface they will all say they want this experience for the athlete, help them completely understand what a World Games experience really entails – consider all the items listed.