



**Special Olympics
South Dakota
Cheer Handbook
January 1, 2026**



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Special Olympics Mission

The mission of Special Olympics is to provide year-round sports training and athletic competition in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, 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 Olympics athletes and the community.

Purpose of Special Olympics

Special Olympics is a **worldwide** program of sports training and athletic competition open to individuals with intellectual disabilities regardless of their abilities. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has granted its Official recognition to Special Olympics International, Inc. (SOI).

Coaching Guidelines

All practice sessions must be supervised by the coach and held in a location suitable for the activities of cheerleaders (i.e. use of appropriate mats, away from excessive noise and distractions, suitable athlete to coach ratio, etc.)

Coaches should recognize a cheerleader's ability level and focus on providing fundamentals. Athletes should not be pressed to perform activities until everyone has a good safety understanding.

All cheerleading squads should adopt a comprehensive conditioning and strength-building program.

Tumbling, partner stunts, pyramids and jumps should be limited to appropriate surfaces during practice and competition.

Coaching quick start guides and cheer rules can be found at the SOI website:

<https://www.specialolympics.org/what-we-do/sports/competitive-cheer?locale=en>

Spectator Guidelines

As fans (family, friends and supporters) of Special Olympics Athletes, it is expected that you will play a positive role at Special Olympics events by following these guidelines:

- Please refrain from using abusive or offensive language towards anyone; judges, coaches, opponents and fellow spectators.
- Keep your emotions under control – Remember that the athletes are amateur athletes and the coaches and officials are all volunteers.
- It may help if you understand the rules of the sport/event. If you need further information or clarification, ask your home program for a copy of the rules.
- De-emphasize winning and losing!
- Let the coach fulfill their volunteer role - and coach the players – please refrain from shouting instructions. This can lead to a penalty incurred by the athlete or team.
- Spectators and fans are prohibited in the competition areas. Only registered/approved coaches and athletes should be on the official playing field/area.
- **All cheers/routines** should stress the spirit of good sportsmanship. Derogatory comments directed to players, coaches or officials will not be tolerated.

Appropriate Attire

- Uniform** Team members must wear outfits alike in style and color. Jeans are not permitted. All team members must have close-toed athletic style shoes (e.g. tennis shoe) with non-marking sole in like style.
Uniforms must be worn during area and state competition.
Women:
- Bottoms: pants, shorts, skorts or skirts (must be at least mid-thigh in length). No slit allowed in skorts, shorts, or skirts. Briefs or bloomers must be worn under all skirts
 - Tops: tank-top, collared shirt or tee shirt (no pockets). No halter tops will be allowed. Straps must be at least 1" in width. Spaghetti straps will not be permitted. When standing at attention, apparel must cover the midriff
- Jewelry** Jewelry of any kind including but not limited to ear, nose, tongue, belly button and facial rings, clear plastic jewelry and bracelets are prohibited. Jewelry must be removed and may not be taped over. Stickers and/or glitter will be allowed but careful consideration must be made so that it presented tastefully. Glitter should not be flaking off.
- Exceptions: medical ID tags/bracelets, and uniform rhinestones. Rhinestones are illegal when adhered to the skin as opposed to a uniform. Temporary tattoos **are** allowed.
- Hair** For safety reasons, long hair should be out of the face and secured (if applicable).
- Props** Props are allowed (posters, mascots, pom pom's)

Appropriate Equipment

- Practice Surfaces** Practice sessions must be held in a location suitable for spirit activities, i.e. appropriate surface/area, reasonably free of obstruction and excessive noise, etc.
- Performance Surfaces** Performing surfaces must be suitable and free from objects. When discarding props (signs, etc.) that are made of solid material, or have corners or sharp edges, team members must gently toss or place the props.
- Use of mini-tramps, springboards, spring-assisted floors or any height-increasing apparatus is illegal for use during performances/competitions.

Divisioning

Ability is the primary divisioning factor in Special Olympics. Cheer teams will be divided into divisions based on ability and the number of squads registered for the competition.

Special Olympics, Inc. guidelines for gender and age groups will further division athletes or teams. Age group guidelines are as follows: 8-15; 16-21; and 22 and over. Open age groups may be established to meet the required minimum number of competitors or teams in a division.

General SOSD Cheer Rules

The Special Olympics South Dakota Cheer Handbook, and SOSD rules and guidelines will govern all cheer competitions sanctioned by SOSD.

All cheerleaders should receive proper training before attempting any form of cheerleading gymnastics (e.g. tumbling, partner stunts and jumps). The only tumbling allowed for SOSD competitions are forward & backward rolls, cartwheels, and round offs. For Unified Sports® teams, the level of tumbling should not exceed that of what Special Olympics athletes are capable of performing.

Coaches are **not** allowed on the floor during the performance of any routine **for any division**. Spotters are permitted on the floor, but cannot coach the squad.

Safety Infractions

Below are some examples of infractions that incur penalty points during competition:

- Unsecured hair devices for longer hair
- Walking on or over props
- Inappropriate or vulgar choreography
- Unsportsmanlike conduct from participant, coach, parent and/or spectator

Teams wishing to compete as a Unified team must have a coach certified in Unified Sports.

Unified Sports® is a program that combines approximately equal numbers of Special Olympics athletes with peer athletes without intellectual disabilities on sports teams for training and competition. Furthermore, all players (Athletes and Unified Partners) are of similar age and ability. Athletes in this program need to have the necessary skill level to participate in the sport so they can be appropriately matched with Special Olympics athletes, and vice versa. Unified Sports expands sports opportunities for current Special Olympics athletes seeking new challenges, as well as a valuable sports opportunity to individuals with or without intellectual disabilities who are not presently involved with Special Olympics.

For Special Olympics South Dakota Cheerleading Unified Sports® team competition, the number of Special Olympics athletes must be equal to or exceed the number of Unified Partners. If at any time during competition, the number of Unified Partners exceeds the number of Special Olympic Athletes; the squad will compete for participation ribbons only. There are no exceptions to this rule. Registration forms will not be accepted without the proper ratio of athletes and Unified Partners.

Rules of Competition

1. Squad must be registered in either a beginner level or an intermediate level.
Beginner - Competition shall consist of each squad of cheerleaders performing three cheers in a time limit of 1 minute and 30 seconds.
Intermediate – Competition shall consist of each squad of cheerleaders performing a music routine as well as three cheers in a time limit of 2 minutes.
2. Routines can consist of a choreographed performance, yells, jumps, high kicks, somersaults and gymnastics moves.
3. There should be no prompting from the audience. However, this is a cheer competition, crowd responses allowed. It is up to the judges to determine whether the cheerleaders are leading the crowd, or the crowd is leading the cheerleaders. Prompting can result in deductions in points.
4. Unified Partners and/or coaches may place the athletes in their proper position on the floor, but the coach may not be on the floor once the performance begins.
5. Coach may give verbal or physical cues from the sideline if needed (coaches must be out of the judges' view).
6. Individuals and teams may choose their own music and must be suitable for family listening. Music must be operated by a coach from your program

Special Olympics South Dakota Cheer Judge Scoresheet

Cheer Squad Name: _____

Judges Name: _____

- Traditional Cheer Unified Cheer
 8-15 16-21 22+

- Beginner - Competition shall consist of each squad of cheerleaders performing three cheers in a time limit of 1 minute and 30 seconds.
 Intermediate – Competition shall consist of each squad of cheerleaders performing a music routine as well as three cheers in a time limit of 2 minutes.

	notes from judge:
<p><u>SELF-MOTIVATION:</u> (maximum 5) Each cheering team should have a cheerleader (one or more) who sets the pace for the team. If there is a coach providing the incentive for the team, fewer points should be awarded.</p>	_____
<p><u>EXECUTION OF CHEERS:</u> (maximum 5) Judges will look for how well the cheer was performed; this includes arm motions, knowledge of words, and voice projection.</p>	_____
<p><u>PERSONAL APPEARANCE and UNIFORMING:</u> (maximum 10) This will include neatness, formations, and overall appeal; uniforms alike in style and color including athletic shoes with non-marking sole.</p>	_____
<p><u>USE OF PROPS AND BANNERS:</u> (maximum 5) Includes pom-poms, posters, signs, etc.</p>	_____
<p><u>POISE:</u> (maximum 5) Judges look for overall poise in front of the crowd. Does the squad continue to perform even if they make mistakes?</p>	_____
<p><u>ENTHUSIASM AND SPIRIT:</u> (maximum 10) Judges will look for smiles, enthusiasm, and overall spirit projection. Are they enjoying themselves?</p>	_____

Total points possible = 40

TOTAL SCORE: _____

AWARDS CRITERIA

- **STATE EVENTS:**
Individual medals will be awarded to the first three places in each division. Place ribbons will be awarded for 4th-8th place.
- **AREA EVENTS:**
Place awards are not presented at area events. All cheer participants will receive ribbons.

SPORTSMANSHIP

Good sportsmanship is both the coaches' and athletes' commitment to fair play, ethical behavior and integrity. In perception and practice, sportsmanship is defined as those qualities which are characterized by generosity and genuine concern for others. Below we highlight a few focus points and ideas on how to teach and coach sportsmanship to your athletes. Lead by example.

Competitive effort

- Put forth maximum effort during each event.
- Practice the skills with the same intensity as you would perform them in competition.
- Always finish a game/event. Never quit.

Fair play at all times

- Always comply with the rules.
- Demonstrate sportsmanship and fair play at all times.
- Respect the decision of the officials at all times.