

## What Is Special Olympics?

Legacy of [Special Olympics](#)

On July 20, 1968, the Special Olympics Torch, "The Flame of Hope," was lit for the first time. On that day, one thousand young men and women with intellectual disabilities from 26 states and Canada took part in sports competition in the Olympic tradition. And on that day, they became the world's first Special Olympics athletes.

The flame lit three decades ago at Soldier Field in Chicago has burned brightly ever since in the hearts of millions of children and adults, their families and communities. Because of Special Olympics, the world has been able to witness the courage, character, dedication, and worth of persons who had once been considered too disabled to be contributing members of society.

Eunice Kennedy Shriver founded Special Olympics in 1968 because of her passionate conviction that persons with intellectual disabilities, young and old, could take part in and benefit from competitive sports. Though many experts were opposed to the idea of competition for persons with intellectual disabilities, Eunice Shriver was convinced that they could, with training and practice, learn to run a race, throw a ball, swim, and play a team sport.

She believed they could experience, for the first time in their lives, how liberating it is to train and to learn, to strive one's hardest, to test one's skills, and to be a winner. She felt certain that the lessons learned through sports would translate into new competence and success in school, in the workplace, and in the community. Above all, she wanted the families and neighbors of persons with intellectual disabilities to see what these athletes could accomplish, to take pride in their efforts, and to rejoice in their victories. These beliefs are reflected in the organization's mission statement.

Once ignored and neglected, hidden at home or isolated from the community, people with intellectual disabilities have gained respect

and acceptance because, through Special Olympics, they have been able to reveal their virtues and display their gifts.

### The Tradition Continues

Today, Special Olympics is the world's largest program of sports training and athletic competition for children and adults with intellectual disabilities. Over one million Special Olympics athletes in the United States and nearly 150 nations take part in year-round training and competition in 24 Olympic-type individual and team sports. They are trained and coached, encouraged and cheered by over half a million volunteers worldwide who support every aspect of the Special Olympics cause, from fund raising to administration, from providing transportation to coaching athletes and officiating at Special Olympics Games.

Special Olympics has the unique distinction of being the only worldwide competitive sports program sanctioned by the [International Olympic Committee](#) to use the word "Olympic" in its name. Throughout the world, Special Olympics is widely recognized as the program that most nearly fulfills the Olympic ideal of sports - competition not for money, victory not for endorsements, and participation not for personal glory or national pride, but for the sheer joy of taking part.

For everyone with intellectual disabilities and their families, Special Olympics has become a symbol of hope. To every athlete involved in Special Olympics, the program provides a lifetime of active participation in sports. To volunteers and to the public, Special Olympics offers an experience that uplifts the spirit and touches the heart. Thirty years ago, Eunice Kennedy Shriver lit a flame that would enlighten the world and bring joy and fulfillment to millions. Thirty years later, that spirit continues.