



FAQs – Sport Season Change
Current as of March 25, 2024

Why did Special Olympics Washington realign its sport seasons?

We periodically evaluate program services to identify measures to improve. As we head into our 50th Anniversary in 2025, the staff is working hard to imagine what the *next* 50 years of Special Olympics Washington will look like and how program offerings will continue to evolve. The below reasons were outlined as the reasons why we would make this shift:

Increased Focus and Quality Training: With fewer seasons, athletes can concentrate on specific aspects of their training, allowing for more focused and high-quality preparation. This can lead to improvements in skill development, tactical understanding, and overall performance. This same concept applies to coaches, allowing for more time to prepare, train and provide quality coaching.

Enhance Athlete Performance Peak: Having a condensed schedule may enable athletes to reach their performance peak at specific times of the year, aligning with major competitions or championships.

Reduce Physical and Mental Fatigue: The 3-season model allows for longer off-seasons between major games and the start of the next season, reducing the overall physical and mental strain on athletes. This extended recovery period can help prevent burnout and decrease the risk of injuries associated with continuous high-intensity training and competition. A 3-season model provides athletes and coaches with more extended off-season periods, allowing them to pursue personal interests, spend time with family, engage in activities outside of their sport, and prepare for the coming season. This balance can contribute to overall well-being and mental health.

Enhance Competition and Provide More Experiences: The 3-season model allows all levels of competition to be represented within each season, from local, regional to state competitions or championships. Upholding this hierarchy for advancement is key to our alignment with other sports and Olympic organizations. How athletes qualify to the higher levels of sport should be consistent and fair.

Increase Coaching and Volunteer Support: More time between seasons allows for more time and opportunities to recruit, maintain, and sustain more long-term volunteers and coaches.

What challenges did Special Olympics Washington identify that led to this change?

Special Olympics Washington began this process more than three years ago, using input from our program leads, athletes, and volunteers and identified a variety of challenges affecting our organization's future.

- *Changing Scope of Athlete Participation:* The average age of Special Olympics Washington athletes has increased. And as athletes age, they often retire from high impact and intense cardiovascular sports. In response, we will work to incorporate low impact

sports, in addition to our existing sports like bocce and bowling, throughout the year to provide opportunities for aging athletes.

- *Lack of Local/Recreational Model:* From athlete feedback and the growth, we are seeing in athlete numbers, we need more local competitive and recreational opportunities that meet 100% of our athletes where they are -- in their communities. By adding more opportunities to compete and recreate, this will result in better competition quality, better divisioning, and allow for more growth at region and state levels.
- *State Games Capacity:* Keeping our athletes at the forefront, we are evaluating our state games venues and doing a deep dive to make sure we are offering the most quality event athlete experience available. We are working to identify better competition facilities, and address issues like housing and the decreased availability of housing that limits room to increase participation numbers.
- *Decreased Coach and Volunteer Support:* Post pandemic, we saw a significant decrease in coach and volunteer support. As our athlete population grows, we will need to find better strategies for overall recruitment and retention of volunteers and coaches.
- *Increased Cost and Consideration of Long-term Sustainability Models:* This has been a challenge for all organizations, and like others, we are seeing cost increases across the board – from venues to meals. Ensuring that our structures and staff scaling plans will match our impending increase in participation will be critical as we move forward.

What are the new sport seasons and the sports that are assigned to them?

Before reviewing below, please note that sport offerings will stay the same as they currently are in 2024. The only change will be that the 2024 Fall Season will start at the end of July 2024 instead of at the end of August.

Season	Sports	Season Begins	Season Ends
2024 Fall	Bowling, Gymnastics, Flag Football, Volleyball	Late July	Early November
2025 Winter	Alpine Skiing, Basketball, Cheer, Cross Country Skiing, Figure Skating, Speed Skating, Snowboarding, Snowshoeing	Mid-November	Early March
2025 Spring	Athletics, Bocce, Cycling, Golf, Soccer, Softball, Swimming	Mid-March	Late June
2025 Fall	Bowling, Flag Football, Gymnastics, Pickleball, Powerlifting, Tennis, Volleyball	Late July	Early November

How did you decide which sports would be offered and in which seasons?

We identified the three sports of highest participation as seasonal pillars, -- team basketball (Winter), athletics/track and field (Spring) and bowling (Fall) -- and then looked at multi-sport athlete data over a 5-year period to mitigate as much overlap as possible.

The committee reviewed each sport and weighed challenges like facility availability, weather during season, availability of officials, competing in same sport season as high school or collegiate sports, etc. Many sports naturally fit together based on recommendations from the committee, and based on all these factors this is how decisions were made on which seasons sports would be offered.

For Fall Season sports, how will this work for high school teams or Unified Champion Schools?

We know this will be a challenge for school age teams, especially those who also have teachers as coaches. For Fall, we will release the registration dates as early in the Spring season so teachers/coaches may communicate with students and parents interested in participating in the Fall sports. Ultimately, we are reviewing this and will adjust accordingly to ensure our school age programs can participate.

How was it decided on who would join the committees who helped make this decision?

Members of the committee were selected based on a few factors:

- They are in good standing with Special Olympics Washington (have not have any code of conduct violations or issues since joining),
- They represent different sizes and operating types of programs (all offer multiple sports throughout the year)
- They have held leadership positions (either as a program coordinator or Area Director/Leader),

Were committee members' geographies considered when making selections?

The important part that was considered here is that the east and west sides of the states were represented equally. The specific geographic location of members or their programs were considered, but this was not a determining factor in the selection of members. As noted above, and more important in the determination, was the size of the program and their operating types.

Who was involved in the decision making to move to a 3-season model?

There were many people involved in the decision to shift this direction. The primary group was the coaches and athlete steering committees, who helped highlight challenges we would see in this model with the goal of producing the best outcome. Here are the committees and groups who were part of this decision:

- Coaches and Athlete Steering Committees (2-3 from each Region)
- Family Members
- Games Management Team Members (State Games)
- Board of Directors/Athlete Experience Committee
- Staff

Can athletes participate in more than one sport per season?

The answer to this question is generally, yes, however there is a scenario listed below where athletes cannot. Please read through the scenarios below for better understanding of opportunities athletes have to participate in multiple sports:

1. **Athletes can train and compete in an individual sport and a team sport** in the same season (i.e. swimming and soccer). However, if an athlete qualifies to compete at state in both the individual sport and the team sport, the team sport (soccer) must be prioritized because it impacts a larger group of people or a roster of people. The athlete would not be able to compete in swimming at state because they will have to choose their soccer team.
2. **Athletes can train and compete in two individual sports** in the same season (i.e. athletics and swimming). If the athlete qualifies to compete at state in both sports, the athlete will have to choose which sport they will advance in. If athletes are competing and qualify in Team Relays, they will still need to choose which sport they will compete in at state. Example: They will not be allowed to compete in individual races for swimming and team relays for athletics. Again, if the athlete chooses to advance in swimming, they will not be able to compete in athletics at state.
3. **Athletes may NOT train and compete in two team sports** (i.e. soccer and softball) in the same season. The primary issue here is that if both of your teams qualify in different sports, you will have to choose and will impact one of the teams or rosters. In this scenario, the athlete would impact the soccer or the softball rosters.

Will this change affect an athlete's chance to qualify for the USA and World Games?

If athletes compete and receive a gold medal at a state games or championship event hosted by Special Olympics Washington, they may be eligible to be selected. Please review the criteria for selection for more information on this topic located [here](#).

Do other Special Olympics programs operate this way?

Yes. Many states operate in a 3-season model, but it is up to the state to determine what structure best fits their needs. Like the answer above on 'how this decision was made' there are multiple factors that went into this decision, everything from weather considerations to availability of officials and facilities, and ultimately it is up to each individual state to decide what model best fits their requirements.

What other opportunities will there be for athletes and volunteers during the " Summer Recreation Season?"

The summer recreation period will range from 5-6 weeks depending on the year. There will be many opportunities for athletes and volunteers to engage.

Some examples of programs you may choose to participate in are recreational tournaments or jamborees, your team may elect to try a new sport for the summer and put on a local competition, new or existing sports clinics, sports day-camps, health screenings or engagements, young athletes programming, etc.

If programs and teams choose to offer and participate in summer activities that are based on athlete interest and available resources, the opportunities could be endless! Special Olympics Washington may facilitate certain activities based on athlete interest and available resources, and those opportunities will be shared in the coming months.

What does the medical coverage look like during Summer Season Recreation? How do we make sure we receive coverage?

To receive insurance coverage, the program coordinator or coach will need to ensure the team has registered and notified Special Olympics of the activities they will be participating in during this time.

An important part of this requirement will be that coaches must confirm they have registration forms for all participants on the roster they submit. Having complete and correct registration forms is a main aspect of how insurance coverage is made available and approved.

If you do not register and choose to do programs not approved by Special Olympics Washington, you will not be covered by our insurance if an incident occurs.

Will all of the sports have a Region competition?

Region competitions will be determined by the number of individuals or teams participating in that sport. Washington will be launching sports criteria called 'Sports Advancement', and a key aspect of this will be defining how and when sports are added at the Region and State levels for competitions. This decision will be based on the number of participants to ensure that we have enough competition to create meaningful divisions of competition for each sport.

Can I coach multiple sports in one season?

No. We understand that this is sometimes the reality of what needs to happen to run a program, but Head Coaches should only be leading one team. However, Assistant Coaches may support more than one team because their capacity requirements are different than that of a Head Coach.

How is SOWA addressing that coaches are aging out?

This is a challenge we recognize, and over this year we will work with each program to understand where this might be a potential future challenge. And more importantly, how can we support putting a contingency plan in place for when coaches do retire. We are also actively looking at different strategies to recruit more coaches into Special Olympics Washington to continue to build in capacity and support teams in the long term and as coaches transition out.

Will this change result in significant cuts in staff?

We are proud and grateful for our dedicated staff who deliver the best programs to our participants. While we don't anticipate a reduction in staff, our staff are doing more with less while continuing to look ahead to a bigger and best-in-class Special Olympics.

As we continue to add and grow both as a program and with resources, we will continue to evaluate where we need to increase capacity to better support coaches, teams, athletes, and their circle of care with their needs.

Like other non-profits, we don't have unlimited funding and we do take into consideration the number of staff we have, the number of programs offered, and what other requirements the organization must operate to continue to sustain and grow offerings.

Is Special Olympics Washington going through financial challenges?

Special Olympics Washington, like many other non-profits, face significant challenges stemming from limited capacity and resources. These hurdles encompass various aspects, including post-pandemic adjustments, heightened competition for funding, rising costs, and the availability of suitable facilities. However, it's important to clarify that these challenges are not the primary drivers behind our current restructuring efforts. Our steadfast commitment remains squarely focused on providing enriching opportunities at the local level for athletes of all abilities. Despite the complexities, we are dedicated to delivering high-quality programming and initiatives with minimal disruption. Extensive planning, collaborative work, and feedback sessions involving athletes, coaches, caregivers, and other key stakeholders have been integral to shaping our approach. Our unwavering dedication to serving our community continues to guide our actions.

How can I get more information or ask questions about the new structure?

We have one more webinar scheduled for Thursday, April 4 at 5:30 pm. You can register to attend that webinar by clicking and following the link [here](#). Also, within this page, there is a place to submit feedback or questions to be reviewed by staff.