

GUIDELINES - BEST PRACTICES for DISABILITY SWIMMING and DIVING

Para Sport for High School Students

Provided by U.S. Paralympics Swimming

Why?

Students benefit from sports in a variety of ways and not just as a release of energy. It helps them prepare skills for the real world by introducing competition in a fun environment where they have time with their peers. It shows them that trying hard gives you a better chance of success. Research has shown that other benefits of being part of a team include improved health, higher self-esteem, and reduced incidence of risky behavior.

These same benefits are applicable to students with a disability (eligible athletes) who participate in sport. Teamwork, goal setting, commitment, physical activity, interaction outside of the classroom and persistence are just a few benefits that are regularly used to promote sport as an educational activity. Those same benefits are applicable to students with a disability.

Let's add a few more to the list of benefits: overcoming adversity—what better way to teach about overcoming adversity than having a disabled student on your squad; students who are different have a tendency to be bullied, but by being a part of sport, there is an increased self-worth; competitive nature—even if you are in a wheelchair, blind or have a hearing impairment, you have a competitive side. Team members may first see the disability but after watching their teammates swim best times and put everything into a race, they will begin to just see ability. The competitive side of the athlete will take over, and disability or not, they won't want to lose, nor will the athlete without the disability.

Who?

Each state association may, in keeping with applicable laws, authorize exceptions to NFHS playing rules to provide reasonable accommodations to individual participants with disabilities and/or special needs, as well as those individuals with unique and extenuating circumstances. The accommodations should not fundamentally alter the sport, heighten risk to the athlete/others or place opponents at a disadvantage.

How will a state determine who is eligible? State associations may establish different eligibility criteria for athletes with disabilities who wish to participate in swimming. Below are some general criteria as determined by state associations:

Options

1. Schools will conduct an individual assessment to accommodate individuals with disabilities to the extent reasonable accommodations can be made that won't alter the essential elements of the sport, increase injury to other participants or themselves, and/or provide the student-athlete with an unfair advantage.
2. If the athlete needs to use equipment or requires a specific accommodation, he/she must submit a request to the principal in advance of competition for individual assessment, and work with the respective state association in consideration of the request.

Best Practices

The athletes must have:

1. A permanent disability.
2. Record on file with the school.
3. Verification of the disability.
4. Demonstrate that they are water safe.



The International Paralympic Committee (IPC) has a very detailed classification system, which is not feasible for high school use. We encourage high schools to look at general groupings such as spinal cord injuries resulting in paralysis, amputation, or cerebral palsy. Other disabilities may include vision loss and hearing impairment.

What events are offered?

Each state may be different in its decision to offer specific events for student-athletes with disabilities. What are your state rules for athletes in the sport? Is there a limit to the number of events that athlete can compete in?

In most cases, athletes with a disability will likely be able to compete in any event offered. For example, vision loss could be included within any event provided that there is the ability to “tap” the athletes when they are close to the turn or finish end of the pool (Illustration 1). Below are state association examples of allowing specific events for athletes with disabilities and integrating athletes with disabilities into existing events.



Illustration 1

Options

1. Several states allow student-athletes with disabilities to compete in the 50, 100, and 200-yard freestyle and the 100-yard breaststroke events.
2. State associations consider individualized accommodations and student-athletes with disabilities are integrated into the regular event program with other able-bodied high school athletes.

Best Practices

1. The distances may be the same as current high school events, as they are equal to distance regularly competed in Paralympic sport, Deaflympics, and other disability-specific competitions.
2. States may offer specific heats within events for student-athletes with disabilities. For example, all of the following disability types are placed into a single heat: spinal cord injuries, moderate to severe Cerebral Palsy (CP), and amputees who are above elbow, knee, or double limb amputees.
3. Student-athletes who have less severe disabilities (mild CP, below elbow or knee impairment, vision loss) could be included in heats with other able-bodied high school athletes and have the same expectations.

Para All America

The National Interscholastic Swimming Coaches Association (NISCA) in conjunction with U.S. Paralympics Swimming have created a new recognition program for high school athletes with disabilities, like the NISCA All America Swimming program. The Para All America Program will recognize the fastest high school para swimmers in the country. In order to be eligible for the award, athletes must have a national sport class through U.S. Paralympics Swimming. More information and time standards can be found at <https://niscaonline.org/Award-Programs/US-Para-Swimming-All-America>.

Competition Models

Two basic models exist for competition within sports: participation and scoring. The scoring model below is an “equal access” model which also has a variety of options.

Options

1. Participation Model
 - a. Student-athletes with disabilities compete at dual, multi-team, and state level, but don't score team points that contribute to the team score to win a meet.
 - b. Student-athletes with disabilities are invited to the state meet based on timed performances.
 - c. Student-athletes with disabilities do not achieve points but do receive medals and can set state records.
2. Scoring Model
 - a. Student-athletes with disabilities achieve swimming high school letters through scoring points.
 - b. Student-athletes with disabilities can score points for the school team.
 - c. The team can score points from its student-athletes with disabilities during the regular season. Student-athletes with disabilities can score points at state, receive medals, and set state records.

Best Practices

1. Swimming does not currently have a specific model for scoring student-athletes with disabilities. Each state association determines whether they are included with all the athletes or scored separately. A scoring model is a fully integrated model based on most states not conducting separate events.
2. The student-athlete with a disability is a contributing member to the team. The scoring model may encourage coaches and schools to recruit athletes into their program.
3. There are many options in the scoring model for a state to choose from.

Advancement to the State Championships

Based on the number of participants, the competitions may need to be held at a set time and day within the state meet structure as opposed to within the time schedule of a class or division.

1. Ranking List – top eight para eligible athletes are invited to the state meet if they qualify through the state's traditional model.
2. Meet a qualifying standard during the season. Standards could be based using the current able-bodied qualifying time compared to the percentage of the World Rankings and then use the same percentage to compare to the World Para Swimming World Rankings to derive a Paralympic eligible athlete qualifying time.
3. Check able-bodied organizations (i.e. USA Swimming or YMCA) for any para standards or procedures they might have. For example, USA Swimming has motivational times and protocols for athletes entering higher level competitions. (see below)

Scoring Model Options

1. Based on athlete numbers:
 - a. Points are awarded based on the total number of participants.
 - b. The one plus one –
 - i. A single student-athlete with a disability would receive a point (or the number determined by the state) and a medal.
 - ii. Two student-athletes with disabilities would receive one point and one medal.
 - iii. Three student-athletes with disabilities would score points and are eligible to receive medals, etc.
 - c. Scoring would be based on the system used by the state in the traditional model if full heats exist.
2. Based on achieving minimum standard:

Student-athletes with disabilities must achieve a minimum standard in the competition in order to earn a point. This is used to encourage a higher level of competition. A minimum standard could be derived from the U.S. Paralympics Swimming Can-Am Standards which can be found at: <https://www.teamusa.org/US-Paralympics/Sports/Swimming/Athletes/Standards>.

Advancement to the State Championship Options:

1. Ranking list – top eight student-athletes with disabilities are invited to the state meet if they qualify through the state's traditional model.
2. Examples from USA Swimming:
 - a. Using Motivational Times: For selection to a championship team, selection is based on performance using the USA Motivational Time Standards. The standards allow for

grouping athletes with a disability in a consistent manner. There are three (3) groupings for athletes to place themselves based on their disability. The standards provide a fair, consistent qualifying time for meet staff to use to bring the appropriate athletes to their state championships. Information can be found at <https://www.usaswimming.org/utility/landing-pages/club/disability> Student-athletes meet a qualifying standard during the course of the season. Standards could be based using the current (able-bodied) qualifying time compared to the percentage of the FINA World Rankings and then use the same percentage to compare to the World Para Swimming World Rankings to derive a qualifying time for a student-athlete with a disability. See <http://www.paralympic.org/swimming/rankings>. The following are the classes that could be used to create the standards. S is for freestyle, backstroke, butterfly events, SB is for breaststroke events, SM is for individual medley events. NOTE: This applied for Para-eligible impairments. This would not work for deaf, permanently physically disable athletes that are not Para-eligible, intellectually impaired, etc.

1. Wheelchair athletes' times are based on S5, SB4, and SM5 sport classes.
2. Above elbow, above knee, and multiple amputee/more impaired CP athletes times are based on S8, SB8, SM8 sport classes.
3. <https://www.paralympic.org/swimming/classification>



Determination of Team Championships Options

1. A team trophy is awarded to traditional teams and one for the combined scores of the student-athletes with disabilities and the able-bodied athletes from the same school.
2. If the points scored by a student-athlete(s) with a disability enables his/her team to tie or exceed the highest team point total of another team(s), then the team with a student-athlete(s) with a disability will be declared the co-champion and the other team(s) without the student-athlete(s) with the disability will be declared the outright champion. This applies to the runner-up position as well as the regular season, district, regional, and state meets.
3. Traditional system of awarding team trophies based on the combination of able-bodied and student-athletes with disability points.
4. State championship points, trophies, and medals are awarded for additional divisions with student-athletes with disabilities. Example: Division I – small schools, Division II- large schools, Division III – schools that include student-athletes with a disability.

Best Practices

1. Points for student-athletes would be awarded for competition at all levels.

2. Student-athletes with a disability would be required to meet high school eligibility standards (there may be modifications on age due to previous surgeries or illnesses). It is possible the student may receive accommodation(s) or waivers based on respective state association rules.
3. A state association could designate a set number of competitions that a student-athlete with a disability must compete in to be eligible to advance to state competitions.
4. The student-athlete is responsible for all equipment.
5. Student-athletes would be required to wear school uniform.

Competition Rules

Competition rules for student-athletes with a disability would be the same as those for all athletes unless his/her impairment does not allow the athlete to complete the stroke correctly. Examples are below.

1. Athletes without function in the hips or legs might not be able to complete a breaststroke kick. In this case, they must drag their legs. Athletes with Cerebral Palsy who may not have the coordination to complete the kick must show intent to kick or drag their legs (provided that they show intent complies with the spirit of the rule – i.e. legs moving simultaneously in the same horizontal plane).
2. Athletes without one or both hands are unable to do a two-hand touch in butterfly or breaststroke.
3. Athletes with one upper limb shorter than the other will not be able to touch with both hands simultaneously in butterfly, but they should still bring their arms forwards together simultaneously and show intent to touch at the turn/finish with both arms.
4. Athletes with a disability may start from the water, the wall, or the blocks but should be given time to get into a starting position prior to the race. A coach or team manager may also help the athlete get into a starting position.
5. Competition suits must be regular racing suits (FINA compliant) but may be modified for fit based on the disability. A floating or “wetsuit” is never legal in competition.
6. Paddles, fins, braces, or tape are NOT allowed in competition except as authorized by the state association on an individual basis.

Accommodating Athletes in Practice

Many ambulatory athletes with a mild disability will require few modifications in training or in competition. Many of these athletes are able to compete with their able-bodied counterparts and have already been doing so within the competitive swimming environment. Athletes with a more severe disability, in a wheelchair or have special requirements (i.e. blind or severe case of Cerebral Palsy), may require more modifications. It is best to think in terms of what their bodies can do rather than what they cannot do. Coaches need to help athletes modify how they train and swim to get the most out of the parts of their body that have function for the sport. Often, coaches may need to think out of the box and get away from traditional techniques.

1. Use equipment such as fins or paddles to help the athlete make intervals. Different types of fins may be useful to accommodate the athlete's disability. (Illustrations 2, 3, and 4)

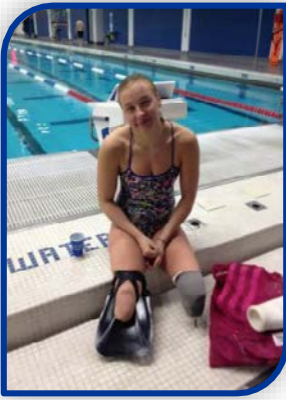


Illustration 1



Illustration 2

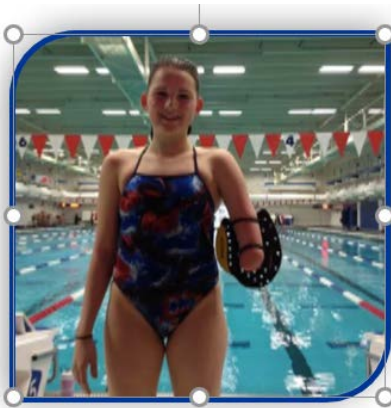


Illustration 3

2. Have the other swimmers try to swim like the student-athlete with a disability so everyone understands.
3. Modify the distance the student-athlete with a disability swims but keep the same interval as the team.
4. Spend an extra 10 to 15 minutes before or after practice developing ideal techniques or to just try new things with the athlete.
5. Think out of the box for solutions.
6. Challenge the athlete like you would the rest of the team members and make adjustments as needed for the athlete's disability.
7. Enable the athlete to be as independent as possible. For example, use a sprinkler system for blind athletes to be able to turn without tapping assistance from a coach. (Illustration 5)



Illustration 4

Visually Impaired Athletes

Visually impaired athletes need special modifications to accommodate their vision loss, but they are essentially able-bodied and can train as their peers do.

1. For many land sports, they may need a guide runner to assist them, either tethered or non-tethered. Those athletes needing guide runners (blind or severely restricted vision) will need a lane for the athlete and one for the guide next to them.
2. For water sports, they will need assistance at the turns/finish. They may need a person to tap them, a sprinkler system, or any system that will alert them where the walls are. The athlete who is blind may be required to wear an eye mask or blackened goggles when competing.

Deaf Athletes

While deaf athletes are currently not a part of the Paralympic movement, they are another population that will require minor modifications.

1. Athletes may need to see the starter to give some type of signal or have an assistant do a touch start.
2. Strobe lights that work simultaneously with the starting signal may be used.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF
THIS DOCUMENT**

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