



Middle School Unified Cornhole Coaching Guide

Introduction and How to Use This Coaching Guide

In Special Olympics, coaches play a unique and indispensable role. It is they who impart the sports skills and competitive spirit that define the true player.

Coaches are the role models in the building of character; they assist in the development of the whole person; they give Special Olympics athletes and Unified partners (referred to as teammates) the most immediate awareness of their own worth, their abilities, their courage, and their capacity to grow and improve. Special Olympics athletes and their Unified teammates will be referred to as players.

This Special Olympics New Hampshire Cornhole Coaching Guide was developed, written, and illustrated so that coaches of every level of experience can improve their skills for working with Special Olympics athletes and their Unified teammates. This Coaching Guide includes teaching skills, key words, and suggestions for the teacher/coach, then teaching the basic skills and progressions, competition, transition from skills to the competition, planning practice, modifications and adaptations, meaningful roles for players who are non-ambulatory, developing cohesion among teammates and the rules.

Using this Coaching Guide consistently will raise the level of your coaching and give Special Olympics players, their Unified teammates, and their families the gift of pride and accomplishment that come from doing something well.

Section 1: Basic Skills and Progressions

CORNHOLE BAG TOSS – TIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR GAME

Spinning the Bag

- There are several key elements to perfecting the cornhole toss. What separates the pros from casual players are the mechanics of the toss and the repeat ability of those mechanics.
- Most pros use a spin toss.
 - Adding spin to the bag stabilizes it, similar to the way in which a toy top stays upright while spinning.
 - A spinning bag is more controllable and less likely to move around or "knuckle ball" in windy conditions.
 - When we teach players how to throw the spin toss, it generally takes about 2-3 rounds before they start hitting the board.
 - After that, about 80% of those players never go back to their old style.
 - Some players just can't get used to the spin toss. Others feel pressured and want to go back to what they feel comfortable with.
 - Our recommendation is to keep practicing until you get it.,

Grip, Foot Work and Bag Release

- Grip the bag with four fingers under the bag and the thumb on the top in the center.
- A good starting stance is with both feet together. Knees should be slightly bent, and your body should have a slight lean over your throwing arm to allow your arm to swing straight without hitting your leg.
- Start by stepping forward towards the foul line with the foot opposite of your throwing arm. As you step forward, your arm should swing backward.
- As your weight transfers to your forward foot, your arm will swing past your hip.
- Release the bag above your waistline and allow your arm and hand to finish at head level. As your arm swings, your wrist should rotate only slightly.
- Bag spin should really be achieved by your fingers at the top of the release. As the bag leaves your hand, your index and middle fingers should maintain contact with the bag a little longer, generating the spin. This is the finesse part that takes a lot of practice to master.

Arc

- The flight of the bag should be an arc around 5ft-10ft. Any higher and you lose accuracy and you risk bouncing the bag off the board. Any lower and you risk sliding off the end of the board.
- After you start getting the hang of the toss, your focus should remain on your target and not on the flight of the bag.
- To minimize bounce, the bags should land at a slight angle and not flat. This will lessen the impact and the bags will stick much better to the boards. As you master this technique, you can spin the bags in a variety of orientations.
- Remember, if you want to win, get the spin! Now get toss'n!

Hard Surface Tips

- Playing Bag Toss on soft surfaces, like grass or sand, is optimal because the impact of the bags is lessened, creating less bounce.
- On hard surfaces, such as concrete and asphalt, the impact of the bags can cause the boards to be jumpy, especially if the bags are landing flat. In most situations, you won't care or notice that the boards are moving around a little, but if you have a tournament, then you will want the best.
- An easy and effective solution is to use an old towel. Cut an old towel in half or quarters, fold it up and place it under the legs. The example shown here is a full towel cut in half, folded three times and placed under the front and back legs.
- You can improve how the bag toss and cornhole boards play on hard surfaces by placing an old towel underneath the legs to make it respond more like grass.

Level the Boards

- Bags are intended to slide on the deck of the board.
 - If the boards are tilted, then the bags will either slide too fast, too slow, to the right or to the left.
 - If the boards are tilted to the right, then the bags will slide to the right.
 - If the boards are on a downward slope and tilted back, then the bags will slide too fast and may be hard to keep on the board.
- When we set up the boards, we check to make sure the boards are level by either using a small level or testing the slide with a couple practice throws.
 - If the boards are tilted, we recommend cutting up 6in x 6in squares from an old towel and placing them as necessary under the feet of the board.
 - This is similar to what we discussed in our section titled "Hard Surface Tips".
 - Stack as many squares as needed to level the boards, right to left and front to back.

Board Distance

- As described in our “How to Play” page, the recommended distance between the front edge of the boards for Casual play is 24ft and for Pro play is 27ft. This just emphasizes that distance between the boards really dictates how hard the game is.
- If you and your friends are having a hard time getting bags to stay on the board, they are probably too far apart.
 - Move the boards together a couple feet and see how that changes the scoring.
 - Conversely, if people find it too easy to get the bags on the board, move the boards apart a foot or two.

Excessive Bag Slide

- When the weather is hot and the bags are very dry, the surface may become very slick, meaning it is hard to get the bags to stay on the board. When this condition is present and players become frustrated, move the boards closer together.
- Another technique is to spray a little water on the bags with an old spray bottle. Pros tend to like a lot of slide because it makes it easier to get bags in the hole. Adding arc to your throw will help the bags to stay on the board.

Pro Tips: If your bags are sliding off the board, add more arc to your toss. Toss the bag with a smooth swing of the arm; consistency is key. As you toss, your feet start off together, then as you begin your swing, step with your opposite foot towards the foul line. Throw the bags close to the foul line without stepping over the foul line.

Care Tips: It's best to keep the boards and bags dry and to minimize exposure to UV light.

Safety: Children should not play on or around the playing field without close supervision of a responsible adult and caregiver. Do not stand or play on the boards. Do not eat the filler in the bags; it is plastic.

Section 2: Competition Concepts

COMPETITION PROCEDURE

- All matches will start with a coin flip or similar exercise to determine which Unified Team will throw the first bag.
- In Unified play, athletes will pitch against athletes and Unified Partners will pitch against Unified Partners.
- All matches will be to 21 points or to 25 minutes whichever comes first.
- Each player/team will toss 4 bags on their turn, alternating turns with their opponent.
- Team that scores most points during the close of the previous round will have advantage of board and will toss first in following round.
- Bags must completely land on board for point to be allowed.
- Bags may not bounce or skip onto board. Bags that bounce or skip onto board will be removed from the board and no point will be allowed for that throw.
- Bags may be tossed overhand or underhand.
- Players must remain behind the front edge of their board when tossing a bag but may pitch from either side of the board.
- All rounds will be completed. If Team A has the advantage and reaches 21, Team B still is allowed to throw in order to tie the game at 15 or win the game by exceeding 21 points.
- Matches will not end in a tie, if both teams are tied at 21 or time limit has been reached, a final round will be played to determine the winner.

SCORING

All matches will follow rally point system, which means all points on the board will count with no cancellation by opponent.

- 1 point will be awarded for a bag fully on board.
- 3 points for a bag thrown into the hole.
- 3 points will also be awarded for a bag that originally lands on the board and later in the round is knocked into the hole.

Section 3: Group Dynamics

This area gives coaches additional information in how to facilitate positive player interaction, cohesion and meeting both the safety and interpersonal needs of the participants.

Matching Participants

An important responsibility of the coach is to match players in pairs or small groups for training and skill development. Inappropriate matching may lead to unnecessary injury or lessen the effectiveness of the training experience. The coach should consider the level of skill, sport experience, cognitive functioning in pairing for warm-up and group activities, and the obvious physical characteristics of height, weight, and fitness level when the task involves body contact.

Grouping for Drills

The most effective learning occurs when players are actively learning by doing. Instruction designed for small groups and pairs will maximize time on task and aid in providing critical feedback on performance. In designing small groups, you can either place athletes/partners with similar ability in the same group, or design groups of mixed ability. In all cases there should be a representative number of athletes and partners.

The following recommendations are useful in making decisions about grouping players:

- When a skill, rule, or strategy is being taught that all your players need to know, use a single group for instruction, but then allow for small groups of similar ability to practice the skill at various learning stations.
- When the activity involves combination drills or team tactics, use multiple groups of mixed ability for practice. Some players will seem to work together better with certain other players, but encourage all players to get to know how to perform their best in any group situation.
- Establish new groups or pairs for practicing different skills. Avoid similar player pairing for more than one or two activities a practice, unless they are a team.
- Have a prepared plan for how to group or pair players for each activity. Have player's self-select partners once in a while to build a sense of control and competence, but be careful of cliques that may form or devaluing of less skilled players.

Team Dynamics

As in all sports, the need for most players to belong or affiliate with other team members is of critical importance. The process of making friends and developing certain roles within the group is as much a part of sport as training and competition. Coaches should be especially alert at the beginning of the season when teammates are getting to know each other and judgments about others are being made.

A key component in the genuine integration for special populations in programs like Unified Sports is the attitude, knowledge and subsequent behavior of the coach. Genuine integration of players and partners relies on three key factors, all influenced by the coach: (a) interaction between players, (b) perception of special treatment given the player or partner by the coach, (c) recognition and acceptance of individual impairments in preparing players to successfully train and compete with partners.

The challenge of Unified Sports is to help people without intellectual disability integrate into the previously exclusionary teams of Special Olympics. Coaches need to plan, implement and evaluate actions to assure meaningful participation and enhanced social development of all players. The type of activity, amount of accommodation necessary, and intensity of competition are considered in structuring the sport experience.

Activities should foster respect for the uniqueness of everyone's abilities, motivation and contribution to the unified sport team. Developing sport skills is the foremost task of the coach since players who are not competent to meet the demands of the Unified Sports setting and related social roles, risk disapproval from teammates and others, along with blows to self-esteem. The risks of winning and losing in integrated programs are compounded for the player.

Group cohesion is the term to describe the tendency for members of a group to stick together and remain united as they work toward collective goals and social purposes. Players and partners in cohesive teams will display more positive attitudes, increased confidence and improved performance. Group cohesion can be improved by the following suggestions:

- Use small groups (3-6 people) for practice drills and other team tasks when possible.
- Set team goals that all players understand; success can be easily determined.
- Clarify each team member's role on the team.
- Encourage all players to communicate by calling each other by their name.
- Create opportunities for general communication among players before, during, and after practice and competition.
- Recognize specific players for good performance and encourage teammates to do the same.
- Use cooperative drills that build respect for each player's contribution to the sport.

Section 4: Practices

MODIFICATIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

The focus of the Sport Coaching Guide is to provide coaches with information which will enable them to assist players of all abilities to function at their maximum performance levels. To provide positive experiences means that many players who are challenged in some way will require instructional activities that are adapted to their particular needs.

Modifications of Activities

Players are often denied the chance to learn new skills or activities because they are not physically able to perform the skills exactly according to the coach or the instructional guide. The coach may modify the skills involved in an activity so all of the players are able to participate. For example, modify the activity for wheelchair players thereby allowing the non-ambulatory players to participate.

Accommodating the Player's Special Needs

In competition, it is important that the rules not be changed to suit several players' special needs. However, there are other ways to accommodate the players' special needs.

Changing the Method of Communication

Players sometimes require communications systems that are suited to their needs. Verbally explaining a task may not match up well with some players' information processing systems. For example, the coach could simply demonstrate the sport-specific skill. Some players may need not only hear but also see a skill. This need can be met through the use of a poster board with pictures or video.

Modifications of Equipment

Successful participation in sports for some challenged players requires equipment which has been modified to suit their particular needs. The use of a tennis ball can help when beginning to throw.

Adaptations

Orthopedic Impairments

- Use surfaces that are flat, solid and smooth.
- Use crutches, walkers and canes for stability.

Auditory Impairments

- Use flag or hand signals.
- Learn a few key sign language words.

Visual Impairments

- Use brightly colored equipment or throwing area.
- Use a raised or different texture foul line.

COMPONENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

Have a practice plan.

- **Warm-Up:** Utilize a safe and effective dynamic warm up.
 - Begin with large muscle group activities (such as brisk walking) to increase body core temperature before doing sprints or stretches.
 - Be sure to warm up sport-specific muscle groups.
 - Begin lightly throwing.
- **Review:** After the warm-up, begin practice with a review of last session's skill instruction and/or components of competition. Analyze constantly.
- **Skills Instruction:** Introduce new technical skills. Use skills progression to instruct.
 - Depending upon numbers and abilities, skills stations are useful and effective.
 - Utilize assistant coaches, allowing them to contribute. (We must encourage, support and mentor our assistants so they're prepared to take over one day.)
- **Competition:** Replicate the competition / small games through the big game. Enforce the rules.
- **Cool Down and Injury Prevention:**
 - Slow heart rate down gradually, don't allow players to just stop brisk activity. Stretching is ideal during cool down for injury prevention.
 - This is a good time to provide positive feedback and make announcements to the team.

DEVELOPING YOUR PRACTICE PLAN

TEACHING BASIC SKILLS

Introduce the skill – verbally, without using too much language or getting too deep into details.

Whole versus part – Many basic skills need to be broken down into parts. The proper form for a basketball shot, passing and shooting basketball. Be sure to break complicated skills down into small components, or "tasks", that can then be sequenced together into the larger skill.

Demonstrate and explain the skill – being clear, concise, and consistent in your explanation.

Practice the skill – utilizing a variety of drills and games that will keep players active, involved and interested. Repetition is key, but repetition can be achieved with variety as well. Variety is critical for individuals with attention deficit challenges. It also helps keep individuals motivated to continue trying to achieve a new skill.

Correct errors – be cautious of trying to correct too much at once and provide corrective feedback in a positive manner. *Teaching a skill incorrectly is worse than not teaching it at all.*

THE 5 CS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Clear: Use words that a player can understand or that a player has a point of reference such as “see the ball” as opposed to “find the target”. *(Addresses a player’s need to understand what asked to do.)*

Concrete: Use words that are specific to something physical and/or real. Since players have a cognitive delay in processing words, the challenge is to make concepts concrete. For example, when teaching staying behind the restraining line, a coach can use the physical words of “hot” to assist a player learning the concept. “Hot” refers to the line; the player will burn up if he steps on the line. *(Addresses difficulty in understanding concepts and desired actions.)*

Concise: Use a few descriptive “key words” or cues. Do not use long sentences or multi-part instructions. For example: “Follow through to the target”. *(Addresses a player’s difficulty in understanding verbal instructions and desired actions.)*

Consistent: Use the same word or words for the same action. *(Addresses a player’s need for repetition and reinforcement.)*

Command-oriented: Verbally reinforce the player immediately after a desired action. Make the reinforcement action-oriented and specific to the skill. What to DO, rather than what not to do. *(Addresses a player’s need for frequent motivation and words associated with a physical action.)*

Additional Tips:

- Make sure a player is looking at you when making a coaching point. When needed, respectfully prompt a player to look at you. *(Addresses difficulty in maintaining attention.)*
- Ask players questions rather than always provide directions. Lead them to think for themselves. Verify player responses. *(Addresses independence because they are not always asked to think.)*



SAMPLE CORNHOLE PRACTICE PLAN

Suggest 2 Practices Minimum (repeating and reinforcing concepts for both)

10 minutes	Warm-up en masse lining up on going across the activity area Start by lightly throwing (use good form)
10 minutes	Skill Work (1 coach for every 3-4 players)) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Throwing: Work on good form, gradually adding speed to throwing • Throwing for Distance
15 minutes	Competition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teams of 2 • Go through rules • Provide a mock competition
10 minutes	Bring team together for cool-down stretching (back of lower legs, hamstrings, quads, groin, and arms) and reward efforts (winner's circle with each player receiving accolades); coach notes one positive per each player)

