

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

One Game – Two Perspectives? Insights into Team and Competition Experience in Special Olympics Unified Sports® Handball in the Context of the German National Games 2022

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Abstract

This paper analyses team and competition dynamics in Unified Sports® handball at the Special Olympics National Games 2022. Unified Sports® offers three distinct approaches that provide joint sports activities for individuals with intellectual disabilities, called athletes, and those without, referred to as partners. In this study, 25 guideline-based interviews were conducted with players pursuing the Competitive model and analysed using the coding process of Grounded Theory. An objective was to investigate the players' team and competition experience as well as interaction patterns and their underlying causes in a nuanced manner. The results show prevailing complementary interactions within the handball teams. Partners assume primary responsibility in almost all contexts, guide athletes both within and beyond the sporting context, and provide emotional and practical support. They demonstrate higher handball-specific performance and a more pronounced game understanding than athletes. These performance differences are closely connected to the category of disability. Consequently, the analysed dynamics cannot be clearly attributed to disability or sporting performance. Further interaction patterns may partly be explained by specific requirements of the Unified Sports® concept and the partners' prosocial behaviour. Because of prevailing ambivalent goals, an area of tension emerges between social inclusion and competition. The results indicate that the competition in Unified Sports® handball does not fully comply with the principles of the Competitive model postulated by Special Olympics.

Introduction

Joint sports activities and competitions involving individuals with and without disabilities are gaining in importance, which is why the Special Olympics (SO) Unified Sports® concept opens pioneering perspectives. As the world's largest sports movement for individuals with intellectual and multiple disabilities, SO presents itself as a movement for social inclusion and

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regards Unified Sports® in particular as an effective example of inclusion (Special Olympics Deutschland, n.d.). In this context, Unified Sports® offers a promising opportunity to contribute to the implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2007). Within this concept, SO enables people with and without intellectual disabilities to participate together in sport through three different approaches (Special Olympics, 2024). The present paper focuses on the Unified Sports® Competitive model, whose objective is to provide an inclusive and simultaneously competitive sports offer through specific rules (Special Olympics, 2024). This aspiration appears particularly challenging in sports games, which are inherently characterised by both victory and defeat, as well as the dynamic interplay between cooperation and competition.

The state of research on Unified Sports® competitions remains rudimentary (Ollila & Haegele, 2025). Most existing studies focus on psychosocial effects of joint sports participation, particularly in relation to social-emotional learning, attitudinal change, or personality development (e.g. Accardo et al., 2023; Huber & Pochstein, 2025; McConkey et al., 2013). These studies reveal inequities between athletes with and without disabilities and indicate that partners often assume roles as leaders and helpers. However, these patterns of social interaction have not been examined within the context of sporting competition. The current direction of research may be shaped by interpretations aligned with two of the three Unified Sports® models, which prioritise community, participation, and the removal of barriers over performance-oriented aspects. However, some studies have investigated motor-skill aspects and performance levels of Unified Sports® players (e.g. Ketcheson et al., 2024; Pawlowski, 2025; Skowroński et al., 2024).

There are only a few studies explicitly examining Unified Sports® competition from the players' perspective (Greve et al., 2021; Greve et al., 2025), and these show that joint competitions of individuals with and without disabilities often fail to create an equitable competition situation. They reveal a tension between conceptual guidelines and actual competition practices (Greve et al., 2025; Skowroński et al., 2024). Greve et al. (2021) and Greve et al. (2025) reported asymmetrical structures in handball and basketball based on the category of difference in terms of disability, accompanied by in-group thinking and unequal participation. Partners, players without disabilities, primarily act as supporters of athletes, players with intellectual disabilities – both emotionally and with regard to sport-specific facets. Additionally, they concentrate on athletes' sporting and social development. Current studies reveal an area of tension between equitable participation and competition, which has been interpreted slightly differently across various studies. Pawlowski (2025) highlighted that players in Unified Sports® focus on joyful participation in joint sports activities rather than on performance and sporting ability. Greve et al. (2021) and Greve et al. (2025) identified an area of tension between social support and sporting success that is intensified by deliberate restraint of partners, aimed at enabling athletes to experience success. This tension emerges from diverse goal orientations among individual players (Greve et al., 2025). A comparable area of tension between performance-oriented competition demands and the desire for joyful participation is evident in two studies of a similar setting in which people with and without intellectual disabilities participate in joint competition in handball (Greve & Bechthold, 2019) and rugby (Corazza & Dyer, 2017).

Skowroński et al. (2024) revealed performance differences in basketball: partners possess higher technical abilities, achieve higher game performance, participate more actively in the flow of play, and adopt an overall dominant position compared with athletes. The causes of these differences are still unclear. Similarly, Pawlowski (2025) revealed higher sport-specific motor abilities in basketball among partners. Other researchers showed that Unified Sports® football players exhibited comparable values at almost all levels of physical activity and

differed only in activities of higher intensity (Ketcheson et al., 2024). However, they did not analyse participation in or contribution to the game situation.

To date, the underlying mechanisms shaping team dynamics and interactions remain unclear. In particular, the supportive role of partners requires closer examination. The question arises whether certain dynamics are triggered by the Unified Sports® concept itself, by joint sports activities of individuals with and without intellectual disabilities or rather by the complexity of the sport. Handball in particular, as a dynamic, contact-intensive sport, imposes high motor requirements owing to intense body contact and pressure of space, time, and opponents (König et al., 2022). Success is determined not only by individual performance in competition or by the players' basic performance level but, crucially, by the actions of teammates and opponents (Lames, 1998). The complexity of handball lies in fast-paced transitions, where players must make quick decisions in synchronisation with their team (Espoz-Lazo & Hinojosa-Torres, 2025). This real-time coordination and reorganisation among players require self-organisation, as coaching instructions cannot be given in time. Therefore, verbal and nonverbal communication is necessary. Overall, handball involves many cognitive and mental processes, such as listening, observing, interpreting, making decisions, and performing actions (Espoz-Lazo & Hinojosa-Torres, 2025).

The research gaps outlined above highlight the relevance of an in-depth analysis of team dynamics, interaction patterns, competition perspectives, and the area of tension between social inclusion and competition within the Unified Sports® Competitive model from the players' perspective. Therefore, the present paper reconstructs and analyses the perspectives of handball players at the SO National Games Berlin 2022 by means of guideline-based interviews. The specific objective of this study is to elucidate how athletes and partners experience and interpret the Unified Sports® competition in handball.

To establish the analytical framework for interpreting the findings, the paper delineates the SO competition rules and the Unified Sports® concept, then outlines central theoretical concepts of social interaction and social support.

Competition Rules at Special Olympics

SO competitions differ from other sporting competitions through specific rules and regulations. They take place at regional, national, and international level (Special Olympics, 2022). National Games and World Games are staged every two years, alternating between Summer and Winter Games. International SO rules apply. These are based on the regulations of international sport federations and national professional associations, and have been partially adapted (Special Olympics, 2022). Divisioning plays a central role in SO competitions: participants are grouped into the most homogeneous divisions possible by means of classification systems (Special Olympics, 2024). This grouping takes account of performance level and age in order to ensure fair competitions. In handball, divisioning follows the so-called Swiss system, with a ranking list being drawn up on the basis of wins (Special Olympics Deutschland, 2023). The Maximum Effort Violation Rule prevents disproportionate performance improvements during the tournament, thereby ensuring equal opportunities and preventing tactical restraint during divisioning (Special Olympics, 2024). At the end of the competition, placements are determined and honoured within each division (Special Olympics, 2024).

In addition, the Criteria of Advancement to Higher Level Competition regulates eligibility: athletes must have participated at previous competition levels in order to advance to the next level (Special Olympics, 2024).

The Unified Sports® Concept

Unified Sports® enables individuals with and without intellectual disabilities of all genders to take part together in team and individual sports (Special Olympics, 2024). Three approaches are distinguished, each with its own structure adapted for specific needs. The Unified Sports® Recreation model focuses on joint sports activities regardless of performance level and without competition participation. By contrast, the Unified Sports® Player Development model aims to enable peer learning and mutual support in the development of sport-specific abilities among players with different performance levels. Participation in competition is possible up to the national level. The Unified Sports® Competitive model, which this paper discusses, focuses on preparing for and taking part in national and international SO competitions. All team members should be of roughly the same age and performance level, and possess the necessary sport-specific competencies (Special Olympics, 2024). Under this approach, the sport rules closely mirror those of the relevant professional sports association – in handball, the rules of the German Handball Federation apply to the German National Games (Special Olympics Deutschland, 2021). International regulations additionally stipulate that four athletes and three partners must be on court in a Unified Sports® handball team. In Germany, athletes are required to occupy the goalkeeper position (Special Olympics Deutschland, 2021).

Fundamental is the Principle of Meaningful Involvement (POMI), which is intended to ensure that all team members are actively and meaningfully involved in the game (Special Olympics, 2012). POMI requires every player to contribute their best to the team's success by deploying their individual strengths and taking on important roles without any one player dominating, posing a safety risk, or excluding others. Team members should therefore adjust their level of ability to those of their teammates but not lower it drastically. Players and coaches are expected to internalise POMI and to observe it when forming their teams. Compliance during competition is monitored by observers (Special Olympics, 2012). Additional sport-specific guidelines exist to operationalise POMI (Special Olympics, 2024). While SO formulates these generally for all Unified Sports® players in handball, SO Germany explicitly imposes special requirements on partners: they should avoid dominating play, act as role models, and involve athletes in the flow of play (Special Olympics Deutschland, 2021). It seems problematic that these directives create differences between athletes and partners while ascribing to partners a higher performance level and a supportive role, regardless of the model being pursued.

Interaction Patterns

Against the background of the research interest, it is relevant to examine interaction patterns in the context of Unified Sports® competitions. Social interactions between individuals are described and classified differently depending on the theoretical perspective. According to Watzlawick's systems theory, they can be characterised along the dimensions of symmetry and complementarity (Willemse & von Ameln, 2018). Complementary interactions are based on the adoption of opposing roles: one party assumes a superior position, while the other submits. Symmetrical interactions, by contrast, arise either through mutual acceptance of one another's equal worth, resulting in interaction on an equal footing, or through mutual striving for superiority. Willemse and von Ameln (2018) further state that reciprocity is present when complementary interactions alternate over time so that a form of symmetry emerges in the long term. Interactions are determined not only by individual or situational factors but also by social norms (Willemse & von Ameln, 2018). For example, the social responsibility norm shapes social interactions. It is founded on a sense of responsibility and moral obligation and motivates people to engage in prosocial behaviour when others depend on their support to achieve success or well-being (Berkowitz & Daniels, 1963, as cited in Bierhoff & Rohmann, 2021). In addition, altruism – understood as a motivational state directed primarily at increasing another person's

welfare (Batson, 2014) – can shape social interaction patterns. The concept of othering likewise influences social interaction patterns. Canales (2000) defines othering as a process in which individuals are categorised as ‘other’ on account of perceived deviations from social norms and are consequently stigmatised. A precondition is an established norm that classifies certain groups as norm-conforming and others as deviant.

Within theories of recognition and respect, symmetry and reciprocity are regarded as central premises for equivalence and equal participation (Silter, 2019).

Interactions in team sports – which we examine in this study – are characterised by role allocation, distribution of responsibilities, and coordinated behaviours (Wegner, 2020). In handball, interactions are typically hierarchical between backcourt players and wing and pivot players (Korte & Lames, 2019). Backcourt players structure and dominate interplay as central players (Korte & Lames, 2019). Particularly, the centre is responsible for ball distribution and functions as a playmaker as well as a bridging unit between the other positions (Korte & Lames, 2018). The role of playmaker requires game intelligence and autonomous decision-making to coordinate quick adaptations during the game (Baur, 2009; Espoz-Lazo & Hinojosa-Torres, 2025). Wing and pivot players, in contrast, bear less responsibility for structuring the teamwork and are less frequently involved in offensive situations (Korte & Lames, 2019). Accordingly, a systematic analysis of interaction patterns within Unified Sports® teams is crucial for understanding team dynamics and interpreting equitable participation.

Social Support

Previous research has established that support is highly relevant in the context of Unified Sports® competition. However, a detailed differentiation of support types in Unified Sports® remains outstanding.

Social support constitutes a multidimensional construct that can be divided into emotional, practical, and informational support types (e.g. Cohen & Wills, 1985; House, 1981; Thoits, 1985). Some models additionally incorporate positive social interactions in terms of belonging or companionship (Barrera & Ainlay, 1983; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Fydrich & Sommer, 2003). The understanding underlying the present paper is based on the concept proposed by Fydrich and Sommer (2003). They define social support as the result of cognitive-emotional processing and evaluation of present and past social interactions through which individuals experience or expect assistance in order to cope with tasks, manage burdens, and achieve personal goals. The authors distinguish three interdependent support types: *emotional support* (e.g., receiving appreciation, encouragement, advice, and guidance in problem solving), *practical support* (e.g., relief from tasks, accompaniment, concrete help, receipt of tips, and information) and *social integration* (e.g., a sense of belonging, shared activities, and having trusted persons). Fydrich and Sommer (2003) emphasise that support types are helpful only if they are perceived as positive by the recipient. The helper’s intention may differ from the recipient’s need.

Within the object of investigation, where people with different life situations and backgrounds come together, inclusive and competitive objectives are pursued simultaneously. Consequently, analysing social interactions in Unified Sports® demands a nuanced, context-sensitive approach.

Methods and Materials

Given the rudimentary state of research to date, the present study was exploratory in nature. To reconstruct and analyse the perspectives and experiences of players in Unified Sports® handball, 25 guideline-based interviews were conducted during the National Games Berlin 2022 with 11 athletes and 14 partners. Participants were players from six different Unified Sports® handball teams who volunteered. Sample characteristics are provided in Table 1. The

study was conducted in accordance with the Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Participants of the World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki and in compliance with applicable laws and institutional guidelines. Before each interview, voluntary and informed consent was obtained and documented after information had been provided about the research aims and the handling of data. Information was provided clearly and, for athletes, in simple language to ensure barrier-free communication (Netzwerk Leichte Sprache, n.d.). All interviewees were of legal age, legally competent, and could withdraw from the study or decline to answer individual questions at any time without reprisal. Prior to data collection, interviewers were briefed on working with sensitive topics. The interview guidelines addressed motives for participation in Unified Sports®, personal tasks and goals, perceptions of victory and defeat, and the influence of observers on the team's playing behaviour. Team cohesion, interaction between the groups of players, and individual evaluations of the Unified Sports® concept were also explored. The interview guide contained carefully considered questions and the guide for athletes was written in simple language (Netzwerk Leichte Sprache, n.d.). Open narrative prompts provided a comprehensive insight into participants' individual perspectives and subjective experiences. Interview duration varied by group and ranged from 10 to 30 minutes. All interviews were conducted in German and quoted excerpts of the transcripts were translated into English for reporting. Audio recordings and transcripts were pseudonymised.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (Mean and Standard Deviation)

Players of the Unified Sports® Handball Team	Athletes	Partners
Number	11	14
Gender	9 male, 2 female	7 male, 7 female
Age (years)	25.82±6.46	23.29±5.26

Interview data were analysed using the coding process of Grounded Theory methodology (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), as this approach is particularly suited to investigating and comparing social processes and phenomena in a field that has been little explored to date. This enabled an open and unbiased approach to the research field of Unified Sports® handball within the Competitive model. Key stages of the analytical procedure were coding and memo writing. Analysis was carried out in tandem by researchers with and without field access to ensure continuous communication of results and the necessary distance from the field. Coding was performed separately for athletes and partners in several steps using the MAXQDA analysis software. In this process, only open and axial coding were applied. First, all relevant themes and phenomena in the data were identified and open coded. Within each group, interviews were coded sequentially, with the coding tree being expanded continuously. Analysis continued iteratively until data saturation was reached, such that interviews no longer yielded new information relevant to the research question. During a second pass, axial coding was used to corroborate the identified categories, establish systematic relationships between them, and develop a category system. In total, 1565 codes were inductively generated (1021 codes from partner interviews; 544 from athlete interviews). These were organised under 10 main codes for partners and 8 for athletes across multiple levels before overarching categories were formed. Selective coding to develop a core category (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) was not used.

because the theory generated through the applied coding steps was sufficient to answer the research question.

Results

In the course of the analytical steps, five main categories with several subcategories were extracted from the interview data, reflecting the team dynamics and competition experience of the handball players at the National Games 2022 (see Figure 1). The categories are first outlined, then illustrated by expressive quotations and finally situated within interpretations and theoretical contexts.

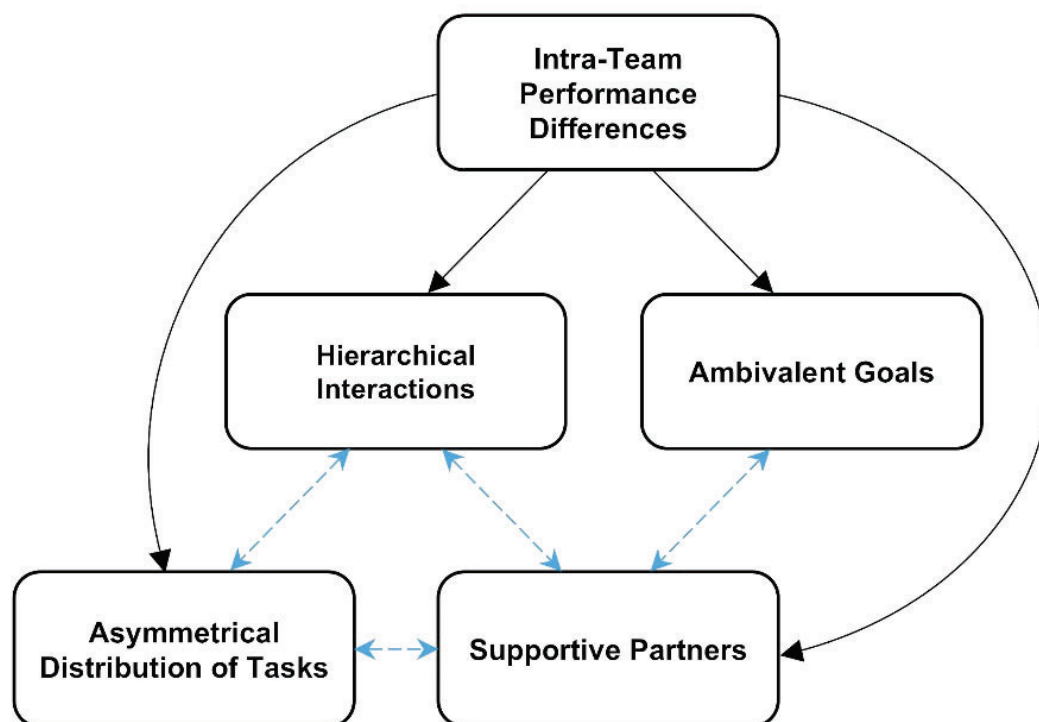


Figure 1. Overview of the Five Main Categories

Figure 1 shows the overview of the five main categories and their interrelationships in Unified Sports® handball within the Competitive model. Intra-team performance differences function as the base category and influence all other categories (black arrows). Dashed arrows indicate dynamic interactions between individual categories. Arrow directions point to assumed causal relationships.

Intra-Team Performance Differences

From the players' perspective, the interviews reveal intra-team performance differences between partners and athletes. Partners perceive themselves as stronger performers in handball because they report lower handball performance by the athletes. They describe giving athletes technical and tactical tips, implying that they attribute higher handball-specific abilities to themselves. Performance differences across teams within the group of athletes are additionally described.

“There are teams with really strong guys with disabilities; physically and athletically they’re way ahead ... they can obviously score goals. With us it’s like, sure, with the Unified partners we probably have some of the strongest here, but if our athletes don’t score we don’t win the match. ... We aren’t here just for us to throw the balls into the goal while our athletes run up and down the sideline.” (Unified Partner (UP) 13, pos. 20)

The quotation shows differences in goal-scoring success between athletes and partners. Performance differences characterise both the partners’ style of play and goals and those of the whole team, because victory is made contingent on the athletes’ performance. Performance differences between partners and athletes have likewise been reported in earlier research (Pawlowski, 2025; Skowroński et al., 2024). One influencing factor is different training and competition opportunities: while athletes typically participate exclusively in a Unified Sports® handball team, partners often engage in an additional non-Unified handball team with regular match participation, which tends to enhance their handball-specific performance. As these differences are linked to many other phenomena analysed, they can be identified as a base category that crucially characterises Unified Sports® handball within the Competitive model. This is particularly noteworthy because the differences identified are not consistent with the approach postulated by SO (Special Olympics, 2024), a point also raised by Skowroński et al. (2024) and Ollila and Haegle (2025). The performance differences influence the interpersonal interactions within the Unified Sports® handball teams, which are described in detail in the following category.

Hierarchical Interactions

The interaction patterns between athletes and partners reveal discrepancies between subjective interpretation and objective analysis.

Perceived Symmetrical Interactions. Players portray the interactions on and off the playing field as symmetrical, even though their explanations simultaneously point to complementary interaction patterns between athletes and partners.

“Actually, we all try to be on equal footing, but when something doesn’t run smoothly you sometimes have to lay down the law, ... even though we’re young, we have a high standing with them. ... if anything’s up, they can always come to us, ... But I’d say there’s no hierarchy. We’re basically all on the same wavelength and on equal footing.” (UP 5, pos. 108-112)

The partner’s statement exposes contradictions: contrary to her subjective interpretation, the fact that partners serve as contact persons for athletes and issue decisive commands does not constitute communication on an equal footing. Her belief that she enjoys high esteem among athletes also implies that she sees herself as being on a superior level. Overall, this deviates from symmetrical interactions described by Willemse and von Ameln (2018). It remains unclear whether partners genuinely perceive the patterns as symmetrical or respond in line with the norm of social desirability (Mummendey, 1981).

Manifested Complementary Interactions. Within the teams, complementary interactions predominate both inside and outside the handball context, with partners assuming a guiding role that athletes follow. On the playing field, partners act as playmakers, lead offence situations, give defensive instructions to athletes, and ensure that they maintain their positions. They shoulder greater responsibility for tactical decisions, sometimes consult with coaches without involving athletes and provide athletes with technical and tactical advice.

“Every player puts forward their opinion and it gets noticed, but we partners still have to check whether these ideas are actually feasible. You know, because we know our players, how it works.” (UP 6, pos. 78)

The quotation illustrates that partners evaluate and selectively implement athletes' suggestions. It also implies that the partner regards his heightened responsibility and decision-making authority as self-evident. Furthermore, complementarity is reinforced by partners acting as assistant coaches who, for example, lead exercises in training.

Complementary interactions are also evident off the handball court, as partners support athletes in everyday tasks and serve as contact persons. The patterns analysed correspond to the complementary interaction defined by Willemse and von Ameln (2018). Greve et al. (2021) and Greve et al. (2025) reported comparable asymmetrical structures and hierarchical relationships within Unified Sports® teams.

Differentiating Wording. Complementarity is reinforced by partners' use of differentiating language towards athletes. Partners draw a clear linguistic boundary between the groups of partners and athletes, whereas athletes do this far less and tend to refer to the team as a whole or to individual players.

"It's difficult, you know, dealing with them; they're different people and you have to look behind the façade first, but at some point you figure it out and then it feels normal." (UP 4, pos. 10)

The quotation reveals not only clear differentiation and in-group thinking but also a devaluation of individuals with intellectual disabilities. This attitude is particularly noteworthy in the context of SO Unified Sports®. Such differentiation can be linked to the process of othering (Canales, 2000) and is likewise highlighted by Greve et al. (2021).

Positive Team Cohesion. Despite the differentiation, the handball teams experience positive team cohesion both on and off the playing field, with particular emphasis on mutual support and a family-like atmosphere.

"In my view the way we get along and the communication on the court are really good. We talk to each other; we look out for one another and, wherever help is needed, if there's a gap, we try to close it so that no one gets through." (Unified Athlete (UA) 8, pos. 62)

The athlete describes a positive team dynamic characterised by mutual thoughtfulness and support during the game. Additional explanations, such as joint activities after training, indicate a positive dynamic off the court as well. Experiencing such positivity is intriguing considering the complementary patterns described above. The latter therefore appears to exert no negative influence on cohesion. Strong team cohesion in Unified Sports® teams has especially been reported in previous research that did not focus on competition (e.g. McConkey et al., 2013) and by Greve et al. (2021).

The analysed complementary interactions are reinforced by the partners' supportive role, described below.

Supportive Partners

From the players' perspective, the Unified Sports® Competitive model is often understood as a concept in which partners act as supporters of athletes. Both groups of players partly refer to partners as 'supporters', yet this role attribution is articulated mainly by partners themselves. In some teams, this understanding manifests in a tandem concept whereby partners deliberately support athletes to enhance their playing practice.

In line with Fydrich and Sommer (2003), three support types were identified. Emotional support is of particular relevance, as many partners emphasise motivating and encouraging the athletes, especially after defeats.

"We're kind of the ones who have to bring the motivation back onto the field ... sometimes it's not that easy ... physically getting a shot on goal ... I understand that it's difficult for the athletes ... and then they let their heads drop. Yet we keep trying to bring in this good atmosphere" (UP 10, pos. 117-135)

The partner attributes the need for emotional support to the high physical demands of handball and the resulting frustration among athletes.

Off the court, partners likewise ensure that all athletes feel comfortable, particularly during the week of the National Games in Berlin.

Moreover, practical support (Fydrich & Sommer, 2003) is central, as partners give athletes technical and tactical instructions during play and debriefings and explicitly create shooting opportunities for athletes through targeted assists. Partners cite the inherent complexity of handball and performance differences as reasons. It also becomes apparent that they regard supporting individuals with intellectual disabilities as the expected norm and transfer this to the sport context.

Outside the handball context, partners assist with everyday tasks such as taking medication. According to the athletes, those with milder impairments are granted more autonomy. This shows that the support type can be attributed to the cognitive abilities of athletes and thus to the category of disability.

The supportive role meets with approval from athletes but also with criticism, particularly when it is perceived as patronising. This evaluation of support points to paternalistic traits within Unified Sports®.

That partners function as supporters both emotionally and within handball in Unified Sports® competitions has been highlighted in previous research by Greve et al. (2021) and Greve et al. (2025), but it has not been further differentiated.

Social Integration (Fydrich & Sommer, 2003) also emerges as a support type, since partners perceive themselves as trusted persons for the athletes – a perception that is, however, not evident from the athletes' viewpoint. Moreover, social integration is present because athletes and partners participate in joint activities through the weekly training, and both groups experience a sense of belonging to a handball team.

Deliberate Restraint. The supportive role is accompanied by deliberate restraint of partners in offence and defence during the handball game. In accordance with the Unified Sports® concept and POMI (Special Olympics, 2012), such restraint is viewed, on the one hand, as an attempt to avoid cautions by observers and injuries, and to maintain the flow of play. On the other hand, it stems from prosocial behaviour, as partners refrain from shots on goal in favour of athletes.

“What I actually find difficult sometimes is really going through and taking the shot on goal (.) because I rather feel I have to or want to pass again; maybe someone else is positioned better right now, ... and I could maybe ... give them a chance. I actually had two or three situations where I was free and then didn't go at all.” (UP 10, pos. 67-71)

The quotation reveals the partner's uncertainty regarding restraint when taking shots on goal. This indicates that, from the partner's perspective, the Unified Sports® concept fails to provide clear role expectations for the players involved. The statement further indicates that partners' restraint is situated in a tension between enabling participation of athletes and making their own contribution to the team's success.

Previous research has likewise identified deliberate restraint by partners in favour of athletes (Greve et al., 2021; Greve et al., 2025).

Athlete Spotighting. Partners perceive their main function in Unified Sports® as putting athletes in the spotlight as well as enabling them to have the most positive playing experience and to gain experience of sporting competition. They realise this spotlighting by giving athletes shooting opportunities through targeted assists, thereby assigning responsibility to them in match-deciding situations. It is worth noting that athletes themselves do not articulate this

spotlighting. Partners push their own development in Unified Sports® into the background and prioritise that of athletes.

“My focus is really somehow to give people the opportunity; so rather this role in which I basically put the others in the spotlight; ... so not to develop myself further in sporting terms.” (UP 11, pos. 48)

The quotation implies the view that, without the partners' actions, the athletes would not have the opportunity to show their handball skills and take shots on goal. Most partners do not perceive the game as a shared handball match. Instead, they focus on spotlighting athletes, which can be explained by the social responsibility norm (Berkowitz & Daniels, 1963, as cited in Bierhoff & Rohmann, 2021) as well as by altruistic behaviour (Batson, 2014). Ultimately, this attitude leads some partners to interpret the National Games 2022 explicitly as an event for athletes rather than as a shared competition, an outcome that is contrary to the inclusive ethos of the Unified Sports® Competitive model.

Asymmetrical Distribution of Tasks

Understanding Unified Sports® as a supportive concept characterises the style of play and distribution of tasks within the handball teams. Whereas partners assume numerous tasks during the game, they assign athletes almost exclusively the act of shooting on goal. Athletes, in contrast, describe a variety of self-ascribed tasks, such as acting as a motivator or promoting fair play, indicating divergent attributions of responsibility. Overall, this exposes an imbalance in the distribution of tasks between the two groups of players within Unified Sports®.

Established Differences in Positions. Teams also exhibit positional differences: partners predominantly occupy strategic, central backcourt positions or are deployed flexibly, whereas athletes are usually placed on the wing or in the pivot position.

“I tend to play right-back or left-back, depending on where the team needs me. ... normally left wing. But in Unified it doesn't really make sense for me to stand out on the left wing if I'm supposed to, well, build the others up, build the play.” (UP 6, pos. 26)

The positional difference between Unified Sports® and the partner's other handball team contrasts the partner's functions in playing with individuals with intellectual disabilities and with those without. This indicates that the distribution of tasks within the Unified Sports® team is mirrored in the positional allocation.

Exclusive Playmaker Role. In almost all teams, partners assume the playmaker role: they coordinate offence and defence, initiate set plays, and ensure that all players keep their positions. Only in one team does an athlete undertake this function.

“As a Unified partner I have done a lot of game management. That's comparable to the playmaker in, let's say, a regular handball team. There's also one person who calls the plays, coordinates who should stand where, basically acting alongside the coach on the court; ... that was clearly my role.” (UP1, pos. 24)

The fact that the centre back player acts as a steering and coordinating playmaker is inherent in handball (Baur, 2009), and therefore not attributable to joint play between individuals with and without intellectual disabilities. However, the finding that this position is filled almost exclusively by partners demonstrates that the distribution of responsibilities in Unified Sports® handball is not equitable. The assumption of the playmaker role by individuals without intellectual disabilities has also been documented in a comparable setting to Unified Sports® by Greve and Bechthold (2019).

Ambivalent Goals

From the players' viewpoint, the National Games are characterised by an area of tension between two competing goals: the aspiration for sporting success on the one hand and the wish for joyful participation on the other. No preference for either goal is linked to membership of the group of athletes or partners. Interestingly, the players keep the two aims separate instead of integrating them.

"The main goal was to have fun, we're not here to be winners, but simply to enjoy playing handball and playing together," (UP3, pos. 42)

Despite this separation, the two goals are often mentioned one after the other, which makes many players' statements appear contradictory. This ambivalence reflects the area of tension identified by Greve et al. (2025), Corazza and Dyer (2017) and Greve and Bechthold (2019) between performance-oriented competitive demands and the wish for enjoyable joint sporting activity of individuals with and without intellectual disabilities. However, Pawlowski (2025) noted that Unified Sports® players prioritise the joyful participation over performance orientation.

A shift of focus from success to joyful participation can be observed during the tournament, caused by comparisons with stronger teams.

Focused Sporting Success. Players express performance-oriented goals such as winning individual matches or a medal, and securing qualification for the World Games. Several partners explicitly state that they want to win on behalf of the athletes or strive to improve the athletes' performance, whereas athletes emphasise improving their own performance during the competition. This indicates that partners orient the Unified Sports® competition at the National Games around the athletes, whereas athletes perceive it as a joint competition.

Focused Joyful Participation. The aim of joyful participation for all includes 'having fun', which many players highlight as an essential component of the National Games. While athletes emphasise the enjoyment of playing handball together, partners additionally locate enjoyment in enabling playing experience and success for the athletes, particularly for those with lower performance levels.

"My coach doesn't want us to win by too much ... We want to win by four goals or so, but no more. ... He also says slow down, let the (.) weaker ones, or those who don't play as well as we do, score some goals; ... that they also gain game experience ... I think that's really good because the weaker ones always need more experience." (UA 2, pos. 165-173)

By advocating restraint towards opposing teams to allow lower-performing players opportunities to score, the athlete signals an absence of a competitive mindset at the National Games. This underscores the aim of enabling everyone to experience a joyful competition. The athlete's goals appear to be strongly influenced by the coach's perspective.

Inconsistent Team Goals. Overall, these results indicate that within the handball teams there are neither collective goals nor a shared competitive mindset at the National Games. Players from the same team pursue only individual priorities. Although variation in individual goals within teams is common and thus not specific to Unified Sports® handball, it is unusual for teams to lack common team goals and motives (Wegner, 2020).

Discussion

Many phenomena analysed in Unified Sports® mirror fundamental features of team sports, where role allocation, the associated distribution of responsibilities, and coordinated behaviours are typically present (Wegner, 2020). The establishment of a leadership structure in which players act as playmakers and with a defined role for each teammate is a well-documented phenomenon in handball (Korte & Lames, 2018). The same pattern has already been reported in joint handball games of individuals with and without intellectual disabilities (Greve & Bechthold, 2019). Since the centre's role as playmaker demands game intelligence and autonomous decision-making to coordinate quick adaptations during the game (Baur, 2009; Espoz-Lazo & Hinojosa-Torres, 2025), and the data reveal limited game understanding among athletes, the assumption of the playmaker role by partners seems a logical consequence for building and maintaining the flow of the game, as well as for structuring the interplay between tactical formations. This reveals that the complexity of handball itself reinforces the complementary interaction between players in Unified Sports® handball. As complementary interactions between backcourt players and other players represent a typical dynamic in handball (Korte & Lames, 2019), the complementary interactions identified within Unified Sports® teams may initially be interpreted as regular dynamics in handball. Moreover, both partners and athletes perceive these interactions positively and raise no criticism of the observed complementary patterns.

Nevertheless, the findings highlight the need for critical reflection on the underlying unequal distribution of the roles and responsibilities described between players with and without disabilities – a necessity also emphasised by Ollila and Haegele (2025) as essential for deconstructing prevailing relationship dynamics. Primarily, partners take over responsibility-bearing roles, such as that of playmaker, to facilitate successful handball play. Thus, athletes often occupy roles that largely mirror those they assume outside the sporting context. Whether the complementary interaction patterns and other phenomena identified are primarily driven by the category of disability or rather determined by differences in sporting performance remains unclear. In the data collected, these two aspects are closely interconnected. The question arises as to what extent the basic categorisation into 'athlete' and 'partner' in the Unified Sports® concept (Special Olympics, 2024) – which already implies a complementary structure based on disability – reinforces these phenomena, and whether it is necessary or potentially obstructive to the success of the Unified Sports® Competitive model. The principles of this model, which require players to have similar sport-specific performance levels, suggest that performance should be the only relevant dimension of difference, while disability should not play an important role in the handball match itself – at least in theory. Consequently, the Competitive model holds the potential to enable players with intellectual disabilities to disengage from socially entrenched role ascriptions. A question that arises is whether the positive team cohesion and joint sports activities within a concept labelled inclusive (Special Olympics Deutschland, n.d.) masked this unequal distribution of responsibilities and entrenched structural injustice in Unified Sports® competitions. The interaction patterns observed are shaped by the individual understanding of the Unified Sports® concept – an understanding based on the principle of support, widely accepted by partners and strongly influenced by coaches' views. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of the coaches' perspective and their influence on Unified Sports® appears necessary.

Overall, the analysed Unified Sports® competition does not fully comply with the principles of the Unified Sports® Competitive model posited by SO. The monodirectional supportive role of partners results in partners perceiving the National Games not as a joint competition, but as an event for athletes. Accordingly, the reality aligns more closely with the Unified Sports® Player Development model (Special Olympics, 2024). Although the support types identified are seldom caused by sport-specific factors, the question arises as to whether

handball, given its high complexity (König et al., 2022), is an appropriate sport for a successful Unified Sports® Competitive model. Team sports with lower technical and tactical demands might be better suited to meet the model's requirements. Additionally, partners' restraint is not in line with the Competitive model. On the one hand, it leads to Unified Sports® being interpreted as a competition for athletes. On the other hand, in attempts to comply with POMI (Special Olympics, 2012), partners sometimes drastically lower their own performance and thereby, paradoxically, infringe the principle itself. Consequently, they do not contribute their best to the team's success, do not fully deploy their strengths, and foreground the athletes. As a result, equitable participation in the sense of POMI is not achieved. It must be noted that SO does not define the meaning of 'contributing one's best to the team's success'. In this regard, there may be a difference between Unified Sports® and classic team sports, such that equal participation may be interpreted in different ways. The successful implementation and understanding of POMI from the players' perspective should be investigated in further studies.

Unified Sports® handball is characterised by a central tension between the wish for joyful participation by all and the aspiration of sporting success. Although this should be problematised within the Competitive model, it appears understandable given the real dynamics – Could a competition be regarded as successful if higher-performing players largely dominate play in order to win, while lower-performing players occupy passive roles? Might the distancing from performance-orientation and the focus on joyful participation operate as a coping strategy for partners to avoid disappointment of defeat? Would this tension dissolve if the players on Unified Sports® teams possessed roughly similar performance levels, or would it nonetheless persist owing to social norms surrounding disability?

It remains open how the two aspects of social inclusion and competition can be reconciled considering the prevailing dynamics.

As a critical limitation, the interview timing and setting during the National Games – an event characterised by an experiential character and a competitive environment – may have influenced players' goals and their perceptions of dynamics.

The findings underscore the need for further research on competition within the Unified Sports® Competitive model, particularly studies including match analyses. Such work would allow researchers to examine the extent to which perceived interaction patterns correspond to actual game actions.

Conclusion

The present study provides grounded insights into team dynamics and perspectives on competition in Unified Sports® handball during the National Games Berlin 2022. Although players perceive interactions during competition as symmetrical and emphasise very positive dynamics within their Unified Sports® teams, the analysis reveals predominating complementary interactions between partners and athletes. Within the Competitive model of Unified Sports® handball, partners almost continuously assume strategic, coordinating, and supportive functions, whereas athletes are largely restricted to finishing shots on goal. Ultimately, this results in partners regarding the National Games 2022 as an event for athletes and a venue for enabling participation, rather than as a joint competition. Consequently, complementarity can be interpreted as problematic in relation to the fundamental idea of equitable participation within the Competitive model. Hence, the National Games in handball do not fully conform to the principles of the Unified Sports® Competitive model promoted by SO. This underscores the necessity for partners to engage in critical reflection on their role and interaction patterns – particularly concerning the influence of social norms on the playing field.

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