

European Football for



Development Network

EFDN



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I. THE SPECIAL CHAMPIONS LEAGUE PROJECT

The Special Champions League is a project that aims to enhance the social inclusion of people with an intellectual disability in society through a European Football project. Together with EFDN, SOEE, and eight distinguished football clubs, the plan is to set up a grassroots model for creating and managing a football team for athletes with intellectual disabilities. Young individuals over the age of 15 with intellectual disabilities will be provided with frequent opportunities to play football at a level they are comfortable with. Each football club will deliver regular training sessions, matches, social activities, and educational workshops for three four-month periods within their local community. By creating a method to develop local football teams to train and compete at a low level, they can participate in Special Champions League international match days all over Europe.

Outstanding and exceptionally performing athletes will receive the opportunity to be involved in coaching the team together with the real coach (by unified tandem coaching) to make them examples of inclusion in sports. The organizing partners will stay in touch and share their best practices during international project meetings. The outcome will be extensive and versatile i.e. building the participants' confidence, self-esteem, perceived inclusion, and improving their physical and mental health, during and after the project. The participating organizations will enlarge their network, establish a strong connection with Special Olympics Europe/Eurasia, and share their best practices with each other. They will be a benchmark for the local development of sports for people with intellectual disabilities and will be the motors of change by disseminating activities at all levels; in general, the consortium expects to show everyone what people with intellectual disabilities CAN do, rather than what they CANNOT.



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2. THE BEST PRACTICES RESEARCH REPORT

This handbook was collectively developed as part of the Erasmus+ Collaborative Partnerships project, Special Champions League partners: Special Olympics Belgium, NAC Breda Maatschappelijk, N.E.C. Nijmegen Maatschappelijk, Fundação Benfica, Sport Verein Werder Bremen 1899, Bayer 04 Leverkusen, Fundación Levante UD, KAS Eupen, SO Europe Eurasia, Fundación Alcoraz and the European Football for Development Network. This handbook comprises an extensive research and mapping exercise that the working group conducted on organizations, projects, and methodologies throughout Europe that use sport in some way to establish an inclusive football movement, and that provide frequent sporting opportunities for those with intellectual disabilities. A total of 20 initiatives were identified and 8 of these were selected by the group as best practices according to criteria based on relevance and impact. An in-depth analysis of these two criteria will be described in the handbook. The handbook presents the 8 best practices and

then extracts all initiatives' key mechanisms and activities to identify and better understand the specific inputs that contribute to safe, inclusive, and physical outcomes for the target group. This best practice mapping was undertaken to provide a strong foundation and information for Special Champions League partners, and other non-related organizations all over Europe and abroad, to collaboratively work on a new sports-based methodology designed specifically to create a more inclusive society.

ERASMUS + SPORT

The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.





3. THE TARGET GROUP

People with disabilities are among the most marginalised groups in the world, and they face multiple obstacles to live a life similar to people without disabilities. They experience a lot of discrimination and neglect daily. They have a harder time receiving the healthcare they need (Ali et al., 2013), getting educational opportunities that fit their preferences and abilities (Ahmad, 2018), and being hired in any employment sector (Ravaud, Madiot & Ville, 1992). Apart from that, disabled people are having a hard time fully engaging in social life and participating in recreational activities (Lippold & Burns, 2009; Abells, Burbidge & Minnes, 2008). This might lead to social isolation. Lastly, people with disabilities experience lower self-determination, less social abilities, and a lower general quality of life (Nota, Ferrari, Soresi & Wehmeyer, 2007). All these experiences might lead to problems with mental and physical health in people with disabilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated the development of a greater gap between people with disabilities and without disabilities. To strive for a more inclusive society, the European Union set up a Union of Equality Strategy for the rights of Persons with Disabilities for the period of 2021-2030 (EMPL, 2021). The Union of Equality Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that there are around 87 million people with disabilities in Europe (EMPL, 2021) and aims to create more autonomy, equality, and accessibility for them.

However, the numbers of those with intellectual disabilities in Europe are not very clear. Individuals diagnosed with intellectual dis-

abilities experience their disabilities differently and might have different difficulties engaging in society. To give people with intellectual disabilities equal access to education and the labour market, national strategies should cover the specific needs of people with the diagnoses. This starts by creating policies for children with intellectual disabilities. One thing to note is that research shows that children with intellectual disabilities are scoring significantly lower on fitness tests than children with a typical intellectual development (Golubović, Maksimović, Golubović & Glumbić, 2012).

Guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO) state that children and adolescents are expected to be active at least 60 minutes per day (WHO, 2020). Currently, in Europe, people with intellectual disabilities face difficulties accessing the same opportunities to participate in different types of sports, fitness, and other physical activities (Frey, Stanish & Temple, 2008; Bartlo & Klein, 2011). This results in health gaps in the present, but can also be a prediction of health in later life (Ouellette-Kuntz, 2005). This current lack of physical activity needs to be addressed more.

By providing frequent sporting opportunities for these children, their physical health and mental health will improve. By encouraging them to exercise with others in a safe environment, children with intellectual disabilities can meet new people, gain confidence in their own social and physical skills and can learn about others, and establish social bonds. Taking the time to listen and to adapt to their specific needs will contribute to a more inclusive society.



RESEARCH – STATISTICS

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) defines intellectual disabilities as a neurodevelopmental disorder that starts in childhood and is characterised by difficulties in social and practical areas of living (National Academy of Sciences, 2015). Examples are deficits in reasoning, problem-solving, planning, abstract thinking and learning from experience. There are four severity categories when it comes to intellectual disabilities: mild, moderate, severe and profound. Mild is the most common one found in society. The prevalence of diagnosed intellectually disabled children is lower among young children than older children. It's 0.73% among 3–7-year-old children, 1.45% among 8–12-year-old children and 1.40% among 13–17-year-old children (Zablotsky, Black & Blumberg, 2017). Boys are regularly more diagnosed than girls: 1.48% among boys and 0.90% among girls.

SPORTS AS A TOOL TO CREATE A MORE INCLUSIVE SOCIETY

In 2020 a new European Union Work Plan for Sport 2021–2024 was published to prioritise inclusion and diversity in all fields of education, training, youth and sport (Council of the European Union, 2020). The aim is to tackle racism, discrimination,

and intolerance in sport as well as educating through sport. The next few European policy objectives were identified as key areas to focus on:

- Increase health-enhancing physical activity participation
- Promote education and training in and through sport
- Promote inclusion of people with a disability in sports organisation and European communities
- Promote and disseminate this adapted and improved football/sport methodology to a wide range of stakeholders in countries all around Europe

Sporting activities can play a key role in the lives of children with disabilities. Physical activity benefits children's physical and mental health (Bailey et al., 2013). Exercise creates many neurotransmitters called serotonin, dopamine, and endorphins (Mikkelsen et al., 2017). As a result, exercise improves the general mood, self-esteem and establishes lower anxiety and stress levels. Physical activity also reduces blood pressure and inflammation in the body (Mikkelsen et al., 2017). When playing and exercising together, children benefit from developing social, emotional, cognitive and motor skills. During sporting activities, participants perceive higher levels of social inclusion and integration.





4. THE BEST PRACTICES

The Special Champions League project managers focused their research on organisations, projects, and methodologies throughout Europe -with the exception of one Canadian organisation- that use sport in some way to promote the health and the importance of social inclusion of children with intellectual disabilities. This mapping was undertaken to provide a strong foundation and information for the Special Champions League partners to collaboratively work on a new sports-based methodology designed specifically to create more awareness around this topic. Therefore, the most important criteria used to identify initiatives were:

1. Initiatives that use sport to promote a healthy lifestyle and good well-being;
2. Initiatives that use sport to engage children and youth in meeting other children and young adolescents with intellectual disabilities;
3. Initiatives that use sport to create awareness about the importance of social inclusion of children and youth with intellectual disabilities.

A total of 8 initiatives were identified.

The second step was to identify best practices from these initiatives. An additional set of criteria was applied during the analysis phase to identify those that were best practices, including:

1. Availability of information;
2. Relevance of the initiative to the desired target group.

The next few pages will show you the best practices from these initiatives that fit the project best.

TYPES OF ACTIVITIES





EVERTON IN THE COMMUNITY

Everton in the community is a sporting charity from the United Kingdom. Their disability project was Everton's first project that dealt with a social issue in the local community. With the project, they want to create sports and physical opportunities for disabled people, so they can have the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers.

MAIN GOAL & ACTIVITIES

The main activities of the project are to deliver physical activities to special schools each week. The project also offers weekly football coaching sessions within a team environment and monthly competitive and social interaction opportunities for children and youth with disabilities.



CHALLENGES FACED DURING THE PROJECT

The hardest part of the project is organising with the parents to get their children out-of-school training sessions and competitive fixtures.

MAIN BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPANTS TAKING PART IN THE PROJECT

The main benefits of participants in the project are improved physical health, reduced social isolation, weight loss, competitive opportunities and further social interaction opportunities like understanding of winning and losing, learning new skills, communication, and teamwork.

TYPES OF ACTIVITIES



Year of initiation

2001

Participants per year

450

Total participants

576





FUNDACIÓN LEVANTE UD

LEVANTE UD EDI INICIACIÓN

Levante UD EDI is the biggest football school for people with intellectual disabilities in Spain. A team of football coaches, physiotherapists, doctors, psychologists, and nutritionists work together to create a professional school environment.

MAIN GOAL & ACTIVITIES

The Levante UD EDI Iniciación strives to include children between 5 and 16 years old with intellectual disabilities through sport. They do this by giving football training between September and July and organising the Healthy Habits program, a Social Skills program, a summer camp and activities to promote taking care of the environment. They also organise coexistence days between their school and Levante UD school kids, outsider teams and stakeholder companies.



CHALLENGES FACED DURING THE PROJECT

The project struggles to increase the number of participants every year and to create or co-create a league or tournament for children with intellectual disabilities with other foundations and associations.

MAIN BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPANTS TAKING PART IN THE PROJECT

The project normalises sport in children with a functional diversity and promotes the integration of children with a functional diversity in society through sport. The project also shows an improvement in the children's quality of life on physical, psychological and social levels.

TYPES OF ACTIVITIES



Year of initiation

2016

Participants per year

42

Total participants

235





LaLiga

GENUINE

Santander

FUNDACIÓN LALIGA

LALIGA GENUINE SANTANDER

LaLiga has developed a League in Spain for people with intellectual disabilities through its foundation. They strive to commit professional football to this integrating and socially responsible project.

MAIN GOAL & ACTIVITIES

Fundación LaLiga strives to normalise the practice of football for people with intellectual disabilities, and involve professional football clubs and players with this socially responsible and integrating project. They have been doing this since the 2017/2018 season by creating a League made up of teams from the ID collective (people with intellectual disabilities). The teams are single or mixed categories and can include participating players who have turned sixteen on the date of the call for the phase-in. Players must prove, through official documentation, that they have an intellectual disability of at least 33%.



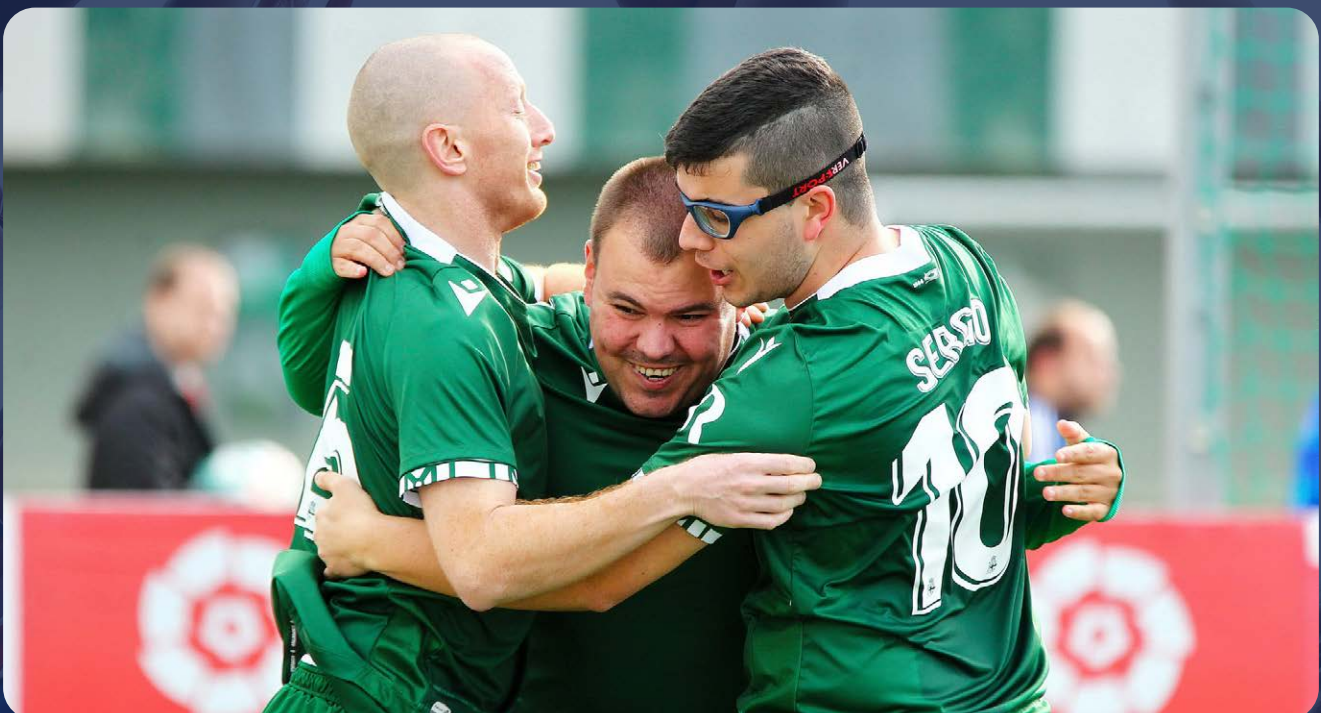
CHALLENGES FACED DURING THE PROJECT

In the beginning, the project struggled to create a unique competition as a pioneer in this area. It was especially challenging to design a league with common rules, that would fit the situation of clubs across the whole country. Besides these challenges, it also proved to be very hard to get professional football teams involved in this project.

MAIN BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPANTS TAKING PART IN THE PROJECT

Football provides a multitude of physical benefits, like improving physical condition and improving the balance and coordination of the participants. In addition, this project has been shown to improve the social development of the participants. By practising a team sport

TYPES OF ACTIVITIES





BIJZONDERE EREDIVISIE

Bijzondere Eredivisie is a Dutch initiative from Stichting het Gehandicapte Kind. It was the first initiative where children with disabilities could play for their favourite football club.

MAIN GOAL & ACTIVITIES

The main goal of Bijzondere Eredivisie is to inspire more children with disabilities to play football and sports. Bijzondere Eredivisie provides a stage for disabled footballers with ambition and wants everyone to see that it is also possible to play football at the highest level if you have a disability. Between September and May, teams play against each other in a tournament format in several league rounds. To experience the feeling of 'home and away', each club hosts a league round once. There are currently about 1,500 children playing disabled football.



CHALLENGES FACED DURING THE PROJECT

One of the challenges the Bijzondere Eredivisie has faced is a financial challenge. At the start of the project, an organisation was affiliated as a funding partner, but this is currently no longer the case. Besides that, maintaining a competitive balance is another challenge:

As a national organisation, they draw up selection criteria in cooperation with an advisory committee. It is then up to the clubs to put together their teams based on carefully drafted selection criteria. Because the target group faces different handicaps, it's important to look for ways to keep the

quality of the teams as equal as possible. Only then everyone gets the chance to fully enjoy 'being a professional'.

MAIN BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPANTS TAKING PART IN THE PROJECT

The project is all about increasing the visibility of people with disabilities and promoting positive perceptions. Children are encouraged to do sports which then contributes to their health, self-reliance, and self-confidence. In addition, the participants have fun, make new friends and have a chance to be part of the 'normal' world.

TYPES OF ACTIVITIES





SCORT FOUNDATION



TANDEM YOUNG COACH EDUCATION

The SCORT foundation is a foundation based in Switzerland that is committed to the idea of a world where children can play sports despite difficult conditions, and that they should have role models to inspire them.

MAIN GOAL & ACTIVITIES

The main objective of the Tandem Education is to enable and motivate young adults with and without a disability (intellectual, sensory and/or physical) to take on the responsibility of coaching disability football. By doing so, they become role models for children playing in their disability football teams. The Tandem Young Coach Education is a one-week education programme, where young people with and without a disability are trained to become coaches in disability football. During and after the education, one person with a disability (Young Coach) and one person without a disability (Tandem Partner) form a 'Tandem'. In these Tandems, they complete the programme led by experts of the Football Club Social Alliance (FCSA) and learn how to develop, plan and implement training sessions for children with a disability. Throughout the week, the participants take part in theoretical and practical workshops where they learn the basics of planning, preparing and conducting a football training session as well as how to adapt exercises for persons with a disability. This way, both Tandem Partners and Young Coaches learn exactly what they need.



Both Tandem Partner and Young Coaches receive a workbook, whereas the one for the Young Coach is designed in Easy Language and complemented with illustrations. Tandems get to apply what they have learned directly during two training sessions with children from local disability football teams. Together, they have to prepare the sessions and then implement them right away, coaching the children and dividing responsibilities according to their abilities. After each session, they have a space to self-reflect and get feedback from the instructors of the course.

CHALLENGES FACED DURING THE PROJECT

The main challenge is the involvement of female Young Coaches. Women and girls with a disability are faced with so-called 'double discrimination'. This means that they are not only faced with discrimination based on gender, but also based on their disability. This lower degree of female participation is reflected in the teams. Additionally – or maybe that's why – there are little to no female role models with whom girls with a disability can identify, in particular female football coaches with a disability. By including 20% females in their education programme, the project creates female role models in this sphere, who hopefully can inspire and motivate more girls with a disability to take part in structured football activities.

MAIN BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPANTS TAKING PART IN THE PROJECT

Through the monitoring and evaluation process, the organisation identified various short- and long-term benefits. The Young Coaches see an increase in self-confidence and improvement of their communication skills as a direct result of the education. They are more comfortable speaking up and feel safer speaking in front of a group or their team. Due to the new position as a Young Coach, they often function as a role model within the team, which shows the other players that there is the possibility to become a coach.

For the Tandem Partner, working in a Tandem produces a sense of relief. The Tandem is able to share or divide tasks, which gives each of them the possibility to better focus on the children taking part in their activities. Additionally, they benefit from the established network through education. Participants meet like-minded people and can exchange ideas, thoughts and best practices amongst each other as well as with instructors – both during and post-project.

TYPES OF ACTIVITIES



Year of
initiation

2010



Participants
per year

24

Total
participants

202



INSUPERABILI

Insuperabili is an Italian initiative that set up a football school for people with disabilities. They are currently present in 17 different Italian cities.

MAIN GOAL & ACTIVITIES

The main goal of the project is to promote inclusion in football clubs all around Italy. The main activities are all football related, with the aim to create a quality football school for people with disabilities. Every team is followed by football coaches, psychologists, and educators.

On the football field, the teams are working on football and psychological goals. The method is made to meet the needs of the individual, because all individuals with disabilities have different skills and struggle with different difficulties. In addition to that, they have created different projects in school to promote inclusion among students. Working on a local level is important, but the international network is also important to give players and staff a more varied experience.



CHALLENGES FACED DURING THE PROJECT

At the start of the project, it was difficult to adjust the project to specific regions of the country. As every region in the country is very different, sometimes a different approach was needed to deliver the project well and to find different ways to meet the needs of the participants best.

The project also faces the challenge of providing a quality and rich experience for everyone, as they currently have seventeen different football schools with different teams.

They also face the challenge of being inclusive and welcoming to everyone. This aspect requires continuous training for them and their staff.

MAIN BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPANTS TAKING PART IN THE PROJECT

The main benefits are different for everyone, but include building relationships with teammates and coaches, creating friendships and improving everyday life in general. Several players have reported that playing football has improved their life and helped them face new experiences. There are also benefits for the staff, as they learn to work in a multidisciplinary environment and create a network of different professionals.

TYPES OF ACTIVITIES



Year of initiation	Participants per year	Total participants
2012	650	4800





**Special
Olympics**

SO UNIFIED WITH REFUGEES

Special Olympics Unified with Refugees is an organisation that focuses its efforts on social inclusion and integration through sport. They provide year-round sports training in a variety of Olympic-type sports for children and adults with intellectual disabilities.

MAIN GOAL & ACTIVITIES

Following their Special Olympics Unified Sports® philosophy, each team will be composed of Refugees and asylum seekers and Special Olympics athletes all together in mixed teams. The main goal is to provide a safe, inclusive, and active environment where young people with and without intellectual disabilities can come together and play football at a level at which everyone feels comfortable.



CHALLENGES FACED DURING THE PROJECT

The typical challenges are the ones related to the management of the logistics of an event. Coordination between the different parties, for example, is one of the challenges faced during this project.

MAIN BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPANTS TAKING PART IN THE PROJECT

The benefits of taking part in this project are: participants improve their physical condition. Participants make new friends while promoting their social integration through sports. They gain confidence, self-esteem, and they become more active and involved in the community.

TYPES OF ACTIVITIES



Year of initiation

2021

Participants per year

3796

Total participants

11389





AUSOME

Ausome is a Canadian organisation that strives to enrich the lives of children with autism and their families through sport. They strive to create a safe environment where children with autism can be active and have fun.

MAIN GOAL & ACTIVITIES

Ausome strives to create a positive experience in sports for autistic individuals and for them to remain active for life.

They offer a variety of sports and recreation programs for children and youth with autism between the ages of 4 and 17. The programme is free to all members, with an annual membership of \$35. A wide range of programmes is offered like football, water polo, cross-country skiing, and gymnastics. One of their goals is to educate a greater community to be more inclusive and understanding of different support needed for autistic individuals, by giving autism training. Autistic individuals in their programmes also receive individual support based on their needs.



CHALLENGES FACED DURING THE PROJECT

The programme and the events heavily rely on community donations and grant funding, as it's free to their members and the annual membership fee does not cover the cost of the programmes they participate in. The programme also offers one on one support and has difficulty finding volunteers to participate in the weekly events.

MAIN BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPANTS TAKING PART IN THE PROJECT

This project has benefits for the children and youth with autism, the parents of these children, and the coaches of these children:

Children and youth with autism learn physical literacy skills – the skills they need to run, jump and throw a ball with other kids. They develop their 'courage

muscle', learning to take more risks in a safe, supportive, and sensitive environment. Children can participate in sports programmes in which their needs will be met and in which they will be respected for who they are. Parents can drop off their children without worry that they will be embarrassed, feel ostracized, or left out.

They can take that worry-free time to connect with other parents who may have similar experiences or commonalities.

Sports coaches and instructors can receive training on how to work with athletes with autism and best support them in their community teams and programmes.

TYPES OF ACTIVITIES



Year of
initiation

2015

Participants
per year

+160

Total
participants

+400



TIPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SPECIAL CHAMPIONS LEAGUE PARTNERS

In the forms sent out to the different organisations, they were asked for tips and recommendations on finding sponsors, staff, and participants. These organisations also gave tips on how to design the activities, how to monitor and evaluate their programs, and how to share the program in the media. The best or most given tips are listed below:

THE BEST WAY TO FIND PARTICIPANTS FOR THE PROJECTS:

- In local special schools in the area;
- Through Special Olympics Organisations;
- Through day centres for people with disabilities;
- By encouraging girls to participate in the projects;
- By establishing partnerships with football clubs, football associations and workshops for people with disabilities;
- By getting involved in local communities.

THE BEST WAY TO FIND STAFF

- By asking parents of the participants to get qualified to participate in the project;
- By trying to find people with a sports or social degree (preferably both);
- By making sure staff has relevant education or experience;
- By being open to having experienced staff train young (inexperienced) people.

THE BEST WAY TO DESIGN SESSIONS OR ACTIVITIES

- By having the ability to adapt and change the sessions to meet the needs of the participants within a moment;
- By considering the abilities and needs of the target group while creating the activities;
- By designing the activities per season;
- By getting input from people with disabilities and incorporating their feedback.

THE BEST WAY TO FIND SPONSORS

- Through (local) businesses;
- Through (local) charities;
- Through government grants;
- Through the Football Association;
- By generating quality content.

THE BEST WAY TO MONITOR AND EVALUATE

- By keeping registers of attendance at sessions, training and competitive matches and by doing case studies of participants, and having focus groups to get feedback from participants, parents, and coaches;
- By starting a continuous evaluation with evaluations after each session or activity;
- By establishing a clear methodology of goals and how to measure those goals;
- By sending out surveys to participants, coaches, families, volunteers, and sponsors to get their feedback.

THE BEST WAY TO SHARE ON THE MEDIA

- By using your football club's Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms to show the story and journey of the projects and participants;
- By paying attention to special dates like learning disability week or international day of persons with disabilities;
- By knowing your audience and adapting your content to them;
- By covering all branches of media: social media, but also traditional media;
- By giving the participants a voice on your social media channels.



5. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Movies, short movies, documentaries, and books.



MOVIES:

- A Mile In His Shoes (2011)
- Chacun pour tous (2018)
- Special (2016)
- Walk. Ride. Rodeo. (2019)
- De toutes nos forces (2013)
- The Loretta Claiborne Story (2000)
- The Peanutbutter Falcon (2019)
- Campeones (2018)
- 100 meters (2016)
- The Kid from Nowhere (1982)
- Radio (2003)
- The Ringer (2005)
- Forrest Gump (1994)
- I am Sam (2001)
- Monsieur je sais tout (2018)
- Champions (2023)



SHOWS:

- Down met Johnny (S2 E3 football related)
<https://www.kijk.nl/programmas/down-met-johnny/nCt11TKfJB>
- Down the road



BOOKS:

- Sport adapté, handicap et santé (by Roy Compte, Gilles Bui-Xuân, Jacques Mikulovic)
- More Than Medals: A History of the Paralympics and Disability Sports in Postwar Japan (by Dennis J Frost)
- Disability, Sport, and Society: An Introduction (by Nigel Thomas)
- Playing on an Uneven Field: Essays on Exclusion and Inclusion in Sports (by Yuya Kiuchi)
- Timur (by Gaby Rasters)
- The Frederick Sisters Are Living the Dream (by Jeannie Zusy)
- Hou van mij zoals ik ben! (by Anne van der Leest-van Wijnen)
- La surface de réparation (by Alain Gillot)



DOCUMENTARIES:

- Het zit in mijn hart (2022)
- Ik ben Thomas en ik ga dood (2010)
- Mein weg nach Olympia (2013)
- Gold, dus kannst mehr als du denkst (2013)
- Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution (2020)
- Raising Phoenix (2020)
- 17 Hours: Chris Nikic's Ironman Story (2020)
- Von der Behindertenwerkstatt in den Hörsaal (2021)

EFDN PARTNERS

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