

Language Guidelines for Athletes with Disabilities: Suggestions for U.S. Soccer

Adapted from multiple sources, primarily from ABILITY Magazine author guidelines

The U.S. Soccer Disability Soccer Committee is providing language guidelines that offer a more accepted and consistent form of representing people with disabilities. The audience for these guidelines includes members of the American soccer community (i.e., athletes, coaches, officials, fans). With that in mind, this document serves as a list of suggestions, as opposed to expectations.

Language is not universal and careful selection of the words used to describe others can influence mindsets. For the disability community, some language-use can be stigmatizing, inaccurate, and/or not applicable. Some view disability as a critical component to their identity and prefer to use identity-first language (e.g., disabled athlete). Others prefer to use person-first language, which de-emphasizes disability by using phrases such as “athlete with a disability.” It can be appropriate to ask an individual what they prefer. It is recommended, however, to develop a repertoire of general, inclusive language. In addition, learning when and how to use disability-specific language is a great strategy.

While preferences may differ, the disability community advocates for language that avoids ableism. Ableism is any language or beliefs that suggest typical abilities are superior. In other words, ableism in the soccer community implies that athletes without disabilities are more deserving than those with disabilities. Success is not a matter of ability; rather, it is a measure of personal development and sport-specific standards.

Generally, when deciding what language to use and when to use it, one should assess sport-specific progress and incorporate known or unknown developmental differences as needed. For example, use disability-specific language if it is essential to the story, topic, or context. Disability-related content should typically be treated as a characteristic rather than the primary focus. In all cases, it is best to avoid patronizing phrases such as “retarded,” “special,” or “handicapped” because it emphasizes divisiveness between persons with and without disabilities. Specifically, university research on the comparative terms “special needs” and “disability” has shown that most people amongst this population prefer the term “disability”.

Importantly, avoid describing successes of an athlete with a disability as “overcoming” their disability or being an “inspiration.” This language implies a tone of condescension and overshadows athleticism in its various forms. Furthermore, avoid labeling people as a group by using “the” (e.g., “the disabled”). When in doubt, keep it simple: call an athlete “an athlete.”

The soccer community strives to become accessible to athletes of varying abilities. U.S. Soccer boasts eight Disability Soccer Organizations (DSO) and counting: AYSO EPIC, Amputee Soccer, Blind Soccer, CP Soccer, Deaf Soccer, Down Syndrome Futsal, Power Soccer, and USYS TOPSoccer. While these eight do not universally represent athletes of any disability category, the DSOs endeavor to create recreational (“participatory”) and competitive (“performance”) pathways for all athletes. DSOs offering performance pathways include coaches and athletes who are competing at the highest levels in the world. Each DSO plays an adapted or modified version of the traditional 11-a-side game that meets similarly-abled athletes “where they are.”

Regardless of the role, members of the U.S. soccer ecosystem must be educated and aware that other members of the soccer community may have visible or invisible disabilities that impact how they access the game. The obligation to utilize appropriate and inclusive language when talking to and about athletes with disabilities is one way to enhance the quality of the American soccer landscape. To further support awareness, please refer to the following list of preferred phrases and language.

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AVOID SAYING...	SAY ATHLETE...
Able-bodied	without a disability
Afflicted; suffering; victim	with a disability
Amputee	with limb difference
Autistic	with autism spectrum disorder
Birth defect	has a congenital disability
Brain damage	with Traumatic Brain Injury
Broken; crippled	with acquired disability
Challenged; feeble	who needs more support
Confined to a wheelchair/stroller	who uses a wheelchair/mobility device
Developmentally delayed	has a developmental disability
Disabled athlete	with a disability
Disabled soccer	disability; adaptive/accessible soccer
Downs (i.e. Downs players)	has Down syndrome
Dumb; mute	who uses alternative mode of communication
Epileptic	with seizure disorder
Handicap	disability
Handicapped (i.e. parking, seating, entrance)	accessible (i.e. parking, seating, entrance)
Hearing impaired	Deaf and/or hard of hearing
Insane; unstable; spastic	has mental health needs
Learning disabled	has a learning disability
Mentally ill	with a mental health difference
Midget, dwarf	of short stature; little person; with dwarfism
Needs assistive device	uses assistive device
Normal; regular; typical	different
Paraplegic/quadruplegic	who has paraplegia/quadruplegia
Retarded; slow; special; defective	has a areas of need, growth, and/or limitation
Wheelchair user/bound	who uses a wheelchair/mobility device

The list above provides suggested language; however, the disabilities referenced are not all-encompassing. The suggested phrases are interchangeable regardless of disability. In other words, person-first language is always encouraged. We are athletes, coaches, referees, fans, and so much more FIRST, regardless of ability.

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