



**United Adaptive Soccer Association (UASA)**

## **Modern Language Guidelines for Disability in Soccer**

**2025 Edition**

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## Modern Language Guidelines for Disability in Soccer

As part of UASA's commitment to accessibility, disability inclusion, and competitive equity, these guidelines establish clear standards for respectful, accurate, and non-ableist language across soccer in the United States. They are written for athletes, coaches, referees, volunteers, administrators, announcers, media, and all stakeholders.

These standards apply to all **UASA-affiliated programs, events, communications, and representatives**, including staff, contractors, volunteers, and media partners. Consistent use of modern language is an organizational expectation, not optional etiquette.

### Scope and Definition of Disability

Disability is a broad and diverse category that includes physical, sensory, intellectual, developmental, psychiatric, neurological, and chronic health conditions. This includes visible and invisible disabilities, permanent and episodic conditions, and disabilities acquired at birth or later in life.

Disability intersects with race, ethnicity, gender identity, age, language, culture, and socioeconomic status. Language choices must reflect this complexity and avoid assumptions about ability, experience, or access needs.

While the term *ability* may appear in legacy titles or program names, UASA uses the term **disability intentionally and directly** throughout this document, in alignment with current self-advocacy, research, and major style guides.

### Governing Principle: Preference-First Language

**Preference-first language is the governing standard for UASA.**

UASA does **not** default to a person-first or identity-first language. There is no universally correct format. Preferences vary by individual, community, diagnosis, culture, and generation.

#### Required Practice

- Ask individuals or teams how they prefer to be described whenever possible.
- Follow the stated preference consistently across speech, writing, announcements, and media.
- Do not correct or override self-identified language.
- Recognize that preferences may change over time.

#### Suggested Script

"When we introduce you or write about your team, what language should we use: 'disabled athlete,' 'athlete with a disability,' or something else?"



## When Disability Should Be Mentioned

Disability should be referenced **only when it adds relevant context**.

### Appropriate Contexts

- Explaining rules, classifications, or divisions
- Describing adaptive equipment or accommodations
- Addressing safety, access, or communication needs
- Using official sport formats or program names

### Inappropriate Contexts

- As background color, novelty, or inspiration
- When unrelated to performance, strategy, or competition
- To frame participation as exceptional because of disability

When referencing classifications, use **official classification terminology**. Avoid casual shorthand or assumptions about severity, function, or competitive level.

## Emphasizing Ability, Skill, and Sport

UASA rejects both deficit framing and inspiration framing.

### Avoid

- “Suffers from,” “victim of,” “confined to,” “wheelchair-bound”
- “Inspirational,” “brave,” or “overcoming disability” as the primary narrative
- Comparing disabled athletes to nondisabled athletes to create contrast

### Use

- Performance-based language: skill, tactics, training, teamwork, leadership
- Neutral descriptions of disability only when relevant
- Accurate soccer and competition terminology

Athletes are competitors first. Disability does not require commentary unless it affects the game.



## UASA Default When Preference Is Unknown

When individual or community preferences are not known and cannot reasonably be obtained:

- Use “**disabled athletes**” or “**athletes with disabilities.**”
- Choose one term per communication and remain consistent.
- Avoid euphemisms or softening language.

### Community-Specific Guidance

- Many D/deaf, blind, and autistic communities commonly prefer identity-first language. Use identity-first language when this preference is clearly established by the group or context.
- For mental health conditions, default to a person-first language unless an individual or community explicitly prefers identity-first.

## Soccer-Specific Application

### Announcers and Media

- Lead with the match, not the disability.
- Mention disability only to clarify rules, equipment, or classification.
- Example: “In Blind Soccer, the ball emits sound and the goalkeeper is sighted.”

### Coaches

- Use performance-based feedback (“strong first touch,” “excellent transition”).
- Avoid disability-qualified praise (“good for someone with...”).
- Describe support needs specifically, not by perceived functioning level.

### Officials and Event Staff

- Use **accessible**, not *handicapped*.
- Describe accommodations plainly (“visual cue cards available,” “AAC supported”).
- Apply these standards consistently when interpretation or translation is provided across languages.



## Avoiding Ableist Language

### Disability Is Not a Metaphor

Avoid using disability-related terms to describe mistakes, weakness, or emotion.

Avoid: *crazy, lame, blind to, crippled by, insane*

Use instead: *unexpected, ineffective, missed, unaware, unsupported*

### Describing Support Needs

Do not rank athletes as “high-functioning” or “low-functioning.”

Instead, describe specific supports:

- “Uses visual schedules”
- “Benefits from extra processing time”
- “Communicates using AAC”

### Mental Health Language and Safety

Use person-first language for mental health conditions unless an individual prefers otherwise.

Mental health diagnoses must **never be disclosed publicly without explicit consent**, including in roster notes, injury reports, announcements, or media coverage.

### Official Sport and Program Names

Always use official names, even when they contain identity-first language:

- Blind Soccer
- Deaf Soccer
- Amputee Soccer
- Down Syndrome Futsal

Do not rename or soften official titles.

## Ongoing Review and Accountability

This is a living document. UASA will review and update these standards annually to reflect evolving athlete preferences, research, and best practices.

Failure to follow these standards may require corrective action in training, communications, or program operations.



## Language Reference Chart

The charts below include outdated or offensive terms solely to help identify what to avoid. It is not exhaustive. When in doubt, ask or consult UASA at [info@unitedadaptivesoccer.com](mailto:info@unitedadaptivesoccer.com).

### 1. General Identity & Group References

Avoid	Use Instead	Notes
The disabled	Disabled people; athletes with disabilities	Never reduce people to a category
Handicapped	Disabled; accessible	“Handicapped” is outdated
Normal / able-bodied	Nondisabled; people without disabilities	Avoid framing disability as abnormal
Special needs	Disability; access needs	Euphemisms are discouraged
Differently abled	Disabled	Avoid softening or inspirational framing

### 2. Person-First vs. Identity-First (Preference-First Rule)

Avoid	Use Instead	Notes
Always person-first	Ask; follow preference	No universal default
Always identity-first	Ask; follow preference	Community norms matter
Correcting self-labels	Match stated language	Never override self-identification
Mixing terms randomly	Choose one per context	Consistency is necessary

### 3. Describing Athletes & Performance

Avoid	Use Instead	Soccer Context
Good for someone with...	Skilled; disciplined; competitive	Performance speaks for itself
Inspirational (due to disability)	Tactical; composed; athletic	Disability ≠ storyline
Overcoming disability	Focus on training or strategy	Keep sport central
Limited / impaired player	Describe play, not diagnosis	Avoid deficit framing

#### 4. Mobility, Equipment, & Access

Avoid	Use Instead	Notes
Wheelchair-bound	Wheelchair user	Mobility devices are tools
Confined to a wheelchair	Uses a wheelchair	Avoid passive framing
Handicapped parking	Accessible parking	Use ADA-aligned language
Special equipment	Adaptive equipment	Neutral and accurate

#### 5. Sensory & Communication Differences

Avoid	Use Instead	Notes
The blind	Blind athlete; athlete who is blind	Identity-first often preferred
Deaf and dumb	D/deaf athlete	“Dumb” is offensive
Nonverbal	Nonspeaking; minimally speaking	Many use alternate communication
Can't communicate	Communicates using...	Describe method, not absence

#### 6. Cognitive, Intellectual, & Developmental Disability

Avoid	Use Instead	Notes
Developmentally delayed	Athlete with intellectually/developmentally disability	Use precise terminology when known
Low- / high-functioning	Describe support needs	Avoid ranking people
Learning disabled (as label)	Athlete with a learning disability	Be specific when relevant

#### 7. Mental Health & Neurological Conditions

Avoid	Use Instead	Notes
Mentally ill	Athlete with a mental health condition	Person-first default
Crazy / insane / psycho	Avoid entirely	Ableist metaphors
Schizophrenic	Athlete with schizophrenia	Diagnosis ≠ identity

**Avoid:** Public disclosure of diagnosis. **Use Instead:** Consent-based, private handling



## 8. Medical & Health-Related Language

Avoid	Use Instead	Notes
Suffers from	Has; lives with	Neutral framing
Afflicted with	Lives with	Avoid tragedy framing
Epileptic	Athlete with epilepsy	Person-first default
Brain damaged	Athlete with a traumatic brain injury (TBI)	Accurate and respectful

## 9. Official Sport & Program Names

Use Instead	Notes
Adaptive Soccer	Referring to alternate forms of soccer
Amputee Soccer	Includes upper and lower limb difference
Blind Soccer	Includes blindness and visual impairment
CP Soccer	Includes ambulatory, neurological conditions like cerebral palsy or brain injuries
Deaf Soccer	Includes D/deafness and Hard of Hearing
Down Syndrome Futsal	For those with Down syndrome, only
Dwarf Futsal	For those with dwarfism under 152.4 cm
Frame Soccer	For those using walkers, crutches, or gait trainers
Intellectual Disability Soccer	Includes those with low intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior
Pan-disability Soccer	For all persons, regardless of disability
Power Soccer	For those using power wheelchairs
Unified Soccer	For those with and without intellectual disability

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