



PATHWAY TO PARTICIPATION



A guide to help students with physical disabilities access and participate in high school sports.

Why this matters

School sports help students build confidence, independence, leadership, and lifelong friendships. All students have the right to participate, including those with physical disabilities. This guide outlines the key steps families, athletes, and schools can take to create a safe, supportive, and inclusive experience.

1. Start the Conversation Early

Who to talk to:

- Athletic director
- Sport coach
- Counselor or school wellness staff

What to discuss:

- The student's interest in joining a specific sport
- Equipment needs
- Practice expectations and team requirements
- Any medical information relevant to safe participation

Schools may ask for documentation confirming a permanent physical disability. This can come from a physician, therapist, or prosthetist.

A trusted advocate (teacher, counselor, healthcare professional) can help families communicate their needs clearly.



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2. Know Your State Association Rules

Each state has a high school athletic association that sets sport regulations and eligibility requirements.

Families and schools can look up their state here: nfhs.org/resources/state-association-listing

Check for:

- Adaptive or para divisions
- Rules about adaptive equipment
- Required forms or approvals
- Sport-specific rules or requirements that may affect participation

Policies vary widely, so early research helps prevent delays.

3. Understand Equal Opportunity in School Sports

Federal guidance requires schools to provide reasonable modifications so students with disabilities can participate safely and fairly.

Reasonable modifications may include but are not limited to:

- Adapting certain practice drills
- Allowing adaptive equipment
- Adjusting warm-up routines
- Ensuring accessible practice spaces

Equal opportunity does not require:

- Changing the fundamental rules of a sport
- Providing an advantage over other competitors
- Changing selective-team structures
- Compromising safety

If a family is unsure how to move forward, they can reach out to Eva at eva@challengedathletes.org for general guidance.

4. Explore Equipment Options Early

Some sports require equipment such as racing wheelchairs, throwing chairs, or running prosthetics.

Families can explore options through:

- CAF Annual Grants (equipment + training support)
- Össur Running & Mobility Grants (running prostheses + clinic opportunities)
- Local adaptive sports clubs that offer loaner equipment
- CAF clinics where students can improve their techniques before joining a team

Planning ahead helps students start practice with their teammates on time.



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5. Join the Team and Get Moving

Once paperwork and equipment needs are addressed, students can begin practicing with their team.

Tips for a successful season:

- Communicate goals and needs with coaches
- Share any relevant medical information
- Ask questions early and often
- Build connection with teammates
- Stay active between practices through clinics or community sports programs

Movement supports confidence, community, and personal growth on and off the field.

6. If Participation Is Denied or Unclear

Families may encounter confusion or uncertainty during the process. If a student is told they cannot participate:

- Ask for clarification from the athletic director or coach
- Reference the federal expectation of equal opportunity for extracurricular activities
- Request a meeting to explore reasonable modifications
- Reach out to Eva at eva@challengedathletes.org for support and guidance

Helpful Links

CAF Grants: challengedathletes.org/grants

CAF Programs & Clinics: challengedathletes.org/programs

State Associations: nfhs.org/resources/state-association-listing

General Support: caf@challengedathletes.org

