Sports Palooza

Sports Palooza Creating an Adapted Sports Experience for Students with Visual Impairments

Sports Palooza is an Expanded Core Curriculum (ECC) event designed to introduce students with visual impairments to adapted sports, physical recreation, and community opportunities.

The goal is simple: show students that sports and recreation are accessible, fun, and possible.

Events like this help students build:

- Confidence
- Teamwork
- Orientation and mobility skills
- Social connections
- Awareness of recreational opportunities in their community

Sports Palooza events bring together students, educators, athletes, volunteers, and community organizations to create a day focused on movement, recreation, and independence.

How Sports Palooza Started

In Region One ESC, Sports Palooza was originally started by Susie Andrews, who hosted the first event at a local ISD field where Special Olympics events were also held.

When the event was revived and expanded, the goal was to create something that allowed students from across the region to try multiple adapted sports in one place.

Each year the event has grown, and the number of participating students and schools continues to increase.

This year we have outgrown three full-sized indoor gyms, and the event is relocating to Weslaco, Texas, where a public park offers soccer and baseball fields that can accommodate even more activities.

Finding a Location

One of the most important steps is reaching out to local Parks and Recreation departments.

When planning Sports Palooza, I contacted the local parks department and explained:

- My role as a specialist supporting students with visual impairments
- The goal of creating recreational opportunities for students
- The educational impact of the event

In my experience, communities are very receptive and excited to support events like this.

Every venue we have used for Sports Palooza has been provided free of charge, including:

- Indoor gym facilities
- Local school sport fields

Many cities or local school districts are eager to support events that benefit students.

Build Strong Community Partnerships

A key part of making Sports Palooza successful is knowing your strengths and collaborating with others.

I recognize that while I can organize events, I am not the best person to teach sports techniques. Because of that, partnering with athletes and coaches is essential.

In the Rio Grande Valley, we are very fortunate to have an active blind sports club made up of accomplished blind athletes who also serve as incredible coaches. They helped lead the sports instruction and ensured students had authentic experiences learning the sports.

It is important that activity stations reflect what is actually happening in your local community. Collaboration with local athletes and recreation groups helps ensure the stations are meaningful and sustainable beyond the event itself.

For example, because we have active blind anglers, beep baseball and goalball athletes in our area, it only made sense to include those sports as stations at our event. Students were able to learn directly from athletes who currently play the sport, which made the experience more authentic and engaging.

When planning your stations, consider what adapted sports and recreational opportunities already exist in your region, and invite those athletes or organizations to lead the activities.

This not only strengthens the event but also helps students build connections to programs they can continue participating in after the event.

We also partnered with:

- Adapted PE teachers
- University volunteers

For example, the UTRGV Women's Volleyball Team volunteered their time to assist with stations and assist students throughout the event

Example Activity Stations

At our Sports Palooza event, we created four main activity stations so students could rotate through different experiences.

Goalball

Students learned the basics of this Paralympic sport and practiced throwing and defending the goal.

Beep Baseball

Students experienced hitting and running toward audible bases.

Blind Anglers Station

A local organization called South Texas Blind Anglers came out and taught students how to fish using adaptive techniques.

Adapted Gym / Free Play

Students had the opportunity to explore adapted equipment, play games, and socialize.

Equipment and Supplies

When starting an event like this, it is not necessary to purchase everything at once.

For our event:

- Some equipment was donated
- Some was loaned by athletes and sports clubs
- Some items were purchased

Examples of equipment used:

- Soccer balls with bells
- Beep baseball equipment
- Goalballs
- Blindfolds / eye shades
- Adapted sports gear

A helpful strategy is to purchase a few items each year and build your equipment inventory over time.

Food and Snacks

Because our budget was limited, we kept food simple and accessible.

Students received:

- Hot dog
- Chips
- Cookie
- Water

Volunteers prepared the hot dogs offsite and delivered them shortly before lunch so the food stayed warm. Each meal was in a grab bag, so students and staff could take them and go.

We also had donated breakfast bars and snacks available for students.

Our regional service center provided ice chests for drinks.

Staff and Volunteer Support

Sports Palooza works best when it is an all-hands-on-deck event.

Teachers and staff were active participants and helped support their own groups of students throughout the stations.

Volunteers included:

- University athletes
- Adapted PE coaches
- Blind athletes
- Teachers and paraprofessionals

Everyone working together ensured students had the support they needed.

Scheduling Tips

One important lesson learned from previous years was building enough time into the schedule.

Schools often travel long distances and must return in time to meet bus schedules.

To help with this:

- Stations started around 9:00, which allowed enough time for full participation
- Lunch was scheduled as the final activity

This way, schools that needed to leave early could grab their sack lunches and depart without missing the main activities.

Key Advice for Starting Your Own Event

Start with community partnerships

Parks departments, universities, and sports organizations are often eager to help.

Collaborate with athletes

Athletes bring authenticity and experience that students really respond to.

Keep food simple

Focus the energy on the activities rather than complicated logistics.

Build equipment gradually

Donations and loans are great starting points.

Be flexible

Each year will improve as you learn what works best.

Sharing Information

When organizing our VI Sports Palooza in Region One, we created a Smore newsletter that served as a central information hub for teachers, volunteers, and staff.

This helped ensure that everyone involved in the event had access to the same information in one place, including:

- Event schedule
- Station descriptions
- Lunch information
- Maps and logistics

Using a single communication hub helped reduce confusion and allowed staff to quickly reference details before and during the event.

You can view an example of our Region One planning Smore here:

🔗 https://app.smore.com/n/8vmrx-vi-sports-palooza

You are welcome to use this as a template or inspiration when organizing your own event.

Lessons Learned

Planning an event like Sports Palooza is incredibly rewarding, but every year we learn new things that help improve the experience for students and staff. Here are some of the biggest lessons learned from organizing the event in Region One.

Start Planning Earlier

One of the biggest challenges the first year was starting the planning process a little late. Because of this, there were some items we could not purchase in time due to purchasing processes and budget timelines.

If possible, begin planning several months in advance so you have time to:

- Secure your venue
- Request volunteers
- Purchase equipment
- Coordinate transportation with districts

Starting early also makes it easier to apply for donations or sponsorships. (H-E-B is a really amazing sponsor)

Choose a Venue That Can Grow With the Event

The event has grown every year, which has been wonderful, but it also means the space must be able to accommodate expansion.

This year's venue had three full-sized gyms, which worked well initially. However, we eventually outgrew the space and are now moving to a public park with soccer and baseball fields.

If possible, look for a location that allows room for:

- Additional stations
- Larger student groups
- Outdoor activities

Make It Clear That Everyone Participates

This event works best when everyone helps.

Teachers and staff were asked to actively support their student groups as they rotated through stations. Making it clear that this is an all-hands-on-deck event ensures students receive the support they need.

Let the Community Shape the Stations

Stations should reflect what is already happening in your area.

Because we have active blind anglers, beep baseball and goalball athletes in the Rio Grande Valley, those sports naturally became part of our stations.

When stations are connected to real community programs, students can continue participating after the event.

Build Extra Time Into the Schedule

Schools often travel long distances and operate on strict bus schedules.

Based on feedback, we adjusted the schedule to:

- Allow more time for schools to arrive
- Ensure students could experience each station
- Place lunch at the very end

This allowed schools that needed to leave early to grab lunch and go without missing the main activities.

Keep the Focus on the Students

It can be easy to get caught up in logistics, equipment, and planning details. But the most important part of the event is giving students an opportunity to:

- Try new activities
- Build confidence
- Connect with peers
- Meet role models

Contact/Collaboration

If you would like more information about organizing an adapted sports event for students with visual impairments, feel free to connect.

Sharing ideas and collaborating across regions helps ensure that more students have access to opportunities like these.

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