

# Talking with Officials about Autism

Referees, umpires, chair umpires, race officials and others who ensure that the rules of play are being followed may need support when interacting with an individual on the autism spectrum. Some athletes may require significant adaptations while others may require very little support. Once officials are educated/aware of the needs of individual athletes, they can also play a role in educating other competitors, coaches, teammates and officials about the unique needs of that athlete, and will be more prepared when officiating similar athletes in the future.

**Here are some examples of supports that might be options for an athlete, depending on the level of competition:**

## 1. Extra Time

Some Autistic athletes may require an extra moment for processing instructions or preparing for play. For example, a coach might give a referee a heads up that player X might take an extra moment to get into position for face-offs.

## 2. Support with Learning Rules

Some athletes on the spectrum may require repeated exposures to competition rules before they understand and are able to apply them. For example, a soccer referee may need to be given the heads up that there is a player on the team who hasn't quite understood the offside rule yet, and will need gentle reminders.

## 3. Adapted Competition Categories

Some sports may benefit from having a competition category that is specifically designed to help officials understand that the athlete requires specialized support. For example, a triathlon may choose to include an adapted heat where Autistic individuals are invited to compete with a support coach who accompanies the athlete and is clearly identifiable to officials.

## 4. Support with Abstract Judgement/Inconsistency

Some Autistic athletes may struggle with rules that are not concrete (i.e., where there are 'shades of grey' in how rules are interpreted). Many individuals on the spectrum thrive with high levels of predictability and structure and may protest if rules appear to have not been followed to the letter. For example, an Autistic athlete may dispute the strike zone or an offside call. It is important to be clear with athletes on the autism spectrum about the rules for respectful interaction with officials and coaches.

