



MINNESOTA SPORTS AND EVENTS: SPECIAL OLYMPICS USA GAMES & OTHER WINS/BIDS

Last Friday, Minnesota Sports and Events was fortunate to be part of another exciting proclamation as Governor Walz announced that Minnesota will host the **2026 Special Olympics USA Games**, June 21-26, 2026.

Minnesota Sports and Events lead the bid strategy along with Special Olympics Minnesota last summer through submission of a 150+ page bid. The majority of the athletic competitions will take place on the University of Minnesota campus. In addition, athletes will stay in dormitories on the “U” campus. As the Governor noted, this event will bring in an estimated \$70M in economic impact and will likely attract over 100,000 people to our community. More importantly, hosting this milestone event will transform lives through inclusion, breaking down barriers and celebrating each athlete’s great achievements. CEO of MNSE, Wendy Blackshaw, will be part of the SOUSA26 leadership team.

Coming off a historic **2022 Women’s Final Four**, MNSE executed an event that brought new energy to Minneapolis and our region...

- Sold-out Target Center both nights (36,000+ people)
- TV ratings peaked at 5.91M views for the Championship game, most watched National Championship Game since 2004
- Incorporated a series of native initiatives including a land acknowledgement and blessing at the ½ time of the Semi-final game; MNLOC gave tickets to 300 native youth to provide access
- A total of 15,000,000+ minutes read by 3rd graders through the execution of a statewide Read to the Final Four campaign
- Dream Court basketball court was installed at Hall STEM school in North Minneapolis
- Highest Tourney Town attendance since 2015 with 23,802 attendees
- Development of Title IX platform that included statewide Championship Tour, Speaker Series, Title IX Celebration at MOA and honoring 11 Title IX Minnesota athletes throughout the past year

Minnesota Sports and Events has bid on over 30 events in the past 2 years...

- Hosted **2022 NHL Winter Classic** at Target Field on January 1, 2022
- Hosting **2022 MLS All-Star** week in August, 2022
- Hosting **Big Ten Women’s Basketball 2023 & 2024, and Big Ten Men’s Basketball 2024**
- Finalist city for **2027-2031 Men’s Final Four**
- Bidding on **2027-2031 Women’s Final Four**
- Finalist City in the bid for the **2031 Rugby World Cup**

STAR TRIBUNE ARTICLE

Special Olympics USA games coming to Twin Cities in 2026

The event is expected to draw 4,000 athletes and 75,000 fans.

By **Randy Furst** Star Tribune | MAY 6, 2022 — 5:25PM



RENÉE JONES SCHNEIDER, STAR TRIBUNE

Gov. Tim Walz made the announcement Friday at the University of Minnesota, which will host events for the 2026 Special Olympics USA.

“Thousands of athletes and fans will gather in the Twin Cities in June 2026 for the Special Olympics USA games, held every four years in the United States for children and adults with intellectual disabilities.

Gov. Tim Walz made the announcement Friday at the University of Minnesota's Huntington Bank Stadium, where he was joined by U President Joan Gabel, UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson and Dave Dorn, president and CEO of Special Olympics Minnesota.



Walz said it will be the single largest sporting event to take place in the United States in 2026 and will showcase the state's commitment to inclusion and show "that every single person can thrive."

"I'm incredibly proud to host this event in Minnesota," Walz said.

The event is expected to draw 4,000 athletes, 10,000 volunteers, 1,500 coaches and 75,000 fans from across the country, parts of Canada and the Caribbean.

The games will include 15 Olympic-type team and individual sports as well as five demonstration sports competitions that are not typically held at the state level, such as stand-up paddleboard and cheerleading. The events will be mainly hosted by the U but there will be other venues, including the M Health Fairview Sports Center in Woodbury.

Two states were finalists in the bid to host the 2026 Special Olympics USA games, said Katie Howlett, a spokeswoman for Special Olympics Minnesota. She said the state organization was not disclosing the other finalist because "it is less like a traditional Olympics bid" and "we are working toward the same mission of inclusion."

Gabel said the university is excited to host the events and will be providing housing, dining, medical facilities as well as the venues where athletes compete.

"Our university shares the same goals of the Games in transforming lives through inclusion and celebrating each person's greatest ability," Gabel said in a statement.

Two Minnesota past participants in Special Olympics programs were introduced as honorary chairs of the games: Jenna Perkins, a senior at Orono High School, and Danny Striggow, a sophomore at the University of Minnesota.

"We're so proud Minnesota is part of the inclusion revolution," said Perkins. Striggow is now a defensive end on the Gopher football team.

UnitedHealth Group is the "presenting sponsor" of the 2026 games. Thompson of UnitedHealth said his company has had a long history of supporting Special Olympics programs. Christine Sovereign, senior managing director and Minneapolis office managing



director of Accenture, will be the CEO of the 2026 games and Adam Hjerpe, a UnitedHealth executive, will serve as board chair.

The Minnesota event will be the sixth Special Olympics USA games. The first were held in Ames, Iowa, in 2006. The fifth will take place in Orlando next month.

The Special Olympics describes its mission as providing year-round sports training and athletic competition for children and adults with intellectual disabilities, "giving them opportunities to develop physical fitness, demonstrate courage, experience joy and participate in sharing of gifts, skill and friendship with their families, other Special Olympic athletes and the community."

The games are projected to generate \$70 million in economic activity, according to Special Olympics Minnesota. That figure is derived from "historical data from all the other USA Special Olympic games held in the past," said Howlett.

Over the years, some economists have questioned such projections. Allen Sanderson, an economics professor at the University of Chicago, said his general rule is "to take whatever figure the sponsoring organization will give you and move the decimal point one place to the left." So the figure should be more like \$7 million, said Sanderson, who does economic impact studies on big-ticket sports events.

He said, for example, if a visitor from out of state is paying \$200 a night for a hotel room, that money goes to the corporate headquarters of the company somewhere else, not Minnesota. Local people who are spending money for tickets, food and beverages would spend it elsewhere in Minnesota if the Special Olympics were not in town, he said. There will be some benefit to hotel and restaurant workers, he said.

The Twin Cities hosted the 1991 International Special Olympics, which drew nearly 130,000 fans over seven days of competition in 16 sports. About 6,000 athletes from around the world participated."