

Autism and Sports



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From physical fitness to social interactions, it's widely understood that playing sports has a number of great benefits. These same benefits also apply to autistic individuals, but autistic traits can sometimes make engaging in sports a little more challenging.

That doesn't mean that autistic people can't enjoy sports, though. In fact, some of the world's greatest athletes have autism.



Why sports can be challenging for autistic people

Autistic traits and their severity vary from person to person. While some autistic people may not struggle at all with sports, others may find it difficult to participate in individual sports, group sports, or both. There are a few of key reasons why this might be the case:

Physical ability:

A 2021 study showed that adolescents with autism had more movement variability and lower coordination when walking and running.

Social interaction:

It isn't uncommon for autistic people to struggle with social interaction and communication, which can make participation in group sports particularly difficult.

Sensory issues:

Sports often go hand in hand with loud sounds and bright lights, triggering sensory issues for autistic individuals.

The best sports for people with autism

Though they may find it challenging at first, autistic people should absolutely be encouraged to participate in sports. Some of the best sports for people with autism include:

Swimming:

You compete individually, but still enjoy the benefits of being on a team. Because there's no ball involved, coordination isn't an issue.

Horseback riding:

Some autistic people find it easier to bond with animals. Horseback riding also teaches you the values of working hard, and how to compete with others.



Track and field:

Like swimming, you can compete individually, but are still a valuable member of the wider team. There's also a wide variety of events within the sport to try out and find your specialism.

Bowling:

A repetitive and structured sport that's ideal for autistic individuals. Compete on your own or as part of a team.

Martial arts:

Predictable, structured, and clear rules of engagement. The coloured belt system also gives a sense of achievement and progression.

