

## A LETTER FROM

MAKARSKA, CROATIA

# Developing a Handball Programme for people with disabilities: The HandbALL IN Project



– Written by Maida Arslanagic,  
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*The founder of the first handball program for children with disabilities, called the HandbALL IN, is Maida Arslanagic, former Croatian handball national team player, who has a Master of Speech and Language Pathology as well as Master in Sports Business Management. She is also a certified handball coach. We asked Maida if she could present her programme to our readers.*

*Prof Nebojsa Popovic MD, PhD  
Editor-in-Chief*

### INTRODUCTION

Handball is a global sport played by 30 million players in 209 countries. One of the most popular sports in the Olympic Programmes and a sport capable of reaching a global audience. In recent years, many attempts have been made to extend handball participation in different populations making the sport available for all. In fact, in

1993, the first wheelchair handball game was played and since 2009 the International Handball Federation became a full member of the International Paralympic Committee. Since then, many developments have extended participation to the elderly with the walking handball project, a modified version of the original handball game, more suitable for the elderly to be able to play and exercise without the risk of injuries. Also, in 2020, the European Handball Federation signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Special Olympics to promote handball for people with intellectual disabilities. Handball is truly a sport that can be played by anybody at any level and any age and bring enormous benefits not only in terms of physical fitness but also in terms of social inclusion and human development with significant improvements on quality of life and independence. An example of a this approach is provided in this article with the experience shared from the HandbALL IN project.

### THE HANDBALL IN PROJECT: DETAILS

HandbALL IN is an adoptive sports program for children and adults with disabilities. The program started in 2019 in Zagreb; today it operates in the cities of Makarska, Metkovic, Split and Sinj. The program is verified by the Education and Teacher Training Agency in Croatia, and puts emphasis on encouraging the inclusion of people with disabilities in the community through sports regardless of gender or level of disability.

The programme has been designed taking into account various methods that are well recognised when working with children with developmental disabilities such as modeling, and adaptations/modifications of space. In addition to other forms of support, visual schedules are used that make it easier for participants to anticipate, follow and exchange activities. Special attention is paid to verbal instructions that are simplified and the use of alternative communication systems such as Picture Exchange



**Image 1:** HandbALL IN training.

**Image 2:** HandbALL IN athlete.

**Image 3:** Team HandbALL IN Makarska.

Communication System, communication books or boards.

Various activities in the program help children face everyday challenges and encourage the strengthening of self-confidence and self-esteem. Through play, gross motor activities and basic handball exercises, the development of cognitive and motor skills is encouraged, and participation in joint recreation supports the development of social skills.

Our training groups are formed in relation to the abilities of the participants and the level of support they need so that each participant can participate as independently as possible in some form of sports activities.

HandbALL IN program in 2020 has won the award for the Best Socially Useful Sports Project in Croatia.

#### **Engaging VOLUNTEERS**

An individualized approach within the training group is enabled by training assistants. This is the role that is assigned to our volunteers, who are primarily trained and who in addition to training, selflessly help and allocate their time to give program participants the opportunity to play sports. Different ways of support levels help children follow instructions, perform certain exercises and engage in play and interaction with others. Although desirable, experience in working with children and young people with disabilities is not necessary for

volunteering. Anyone with good will can join because the most important goal is to bring joy, put a smile on their face and have the desire to learn and help others.

#### **Benefitting from a special assistant: The THERAPY DOG**

Labrador Tira is our four-legged assistant. She completed her two-year education and successfully passed the exam for a therapy dog under the guidance of the Croatian Association for Training Guide Dogs and Mobility. Tira, together with its professional expert leader Maida Arslanagic participates in sports activities within HandbALL IN branches.

Depending on the activities in which the therapy dog is involved, it affects various



**Image 4:** Maida and the therapy dog Tira.

developmental aspects, skills and needs that the child has. The key role is played by a professional expert leader, who plans and directs every activity. A therapy dog helps raise the motivation of participants, and thus has a positive effect on activity outcomes. The use of therapy dogs in supporting human health and well being has been well documented in many fields with positive effects. In particular, various forms of dog assisted therapy and produced positive results in children with various developmental disorders improving their ability to concentrate.

#### HandbALL IN GAMES

In November 2023, the first HandbALL IN Games were held in Makarska, which gathered over 50 participants, people with disabilities, from all our Croatian branches.

Participants enjoyed different handball exercises where they could demonstrate acquired motor and social skills and win a trophy. After the demonstration part, a handball match was played between our branches.

HandbALL IN games are aimed at becoming part of HandbALL IN tradition that will take place annually. This unique event is eagerly awaited by children and parents as "icing on

the top" at the end of a successful HandbALL IN season.

In 2023, HandbALL IN registered more than 130 members, people with disabilities, who had more than 300 hours of free training and engaged 40 volunteers who gave the community more than 500 hours of charity work.

The HandbALL IN program is mainly funded by the local government and is free of charge for all. We take every opportunity to thank all those good hearted souls who support the program, and help spread the HandbALL IN spirit all year round and make this World a better place. Without them this program would not be possible or as such a success.

Handball is a sport that can influence people's lives for the better at any age. Our programme keep growing and making a difference to many people improving their quality of life. Working in partnership with local institutions, local sponsors and parents' group can increase participation and engagement of children and adults that would normally have limited access to sporting experiences. We hope our example can inspire other to follow this path and increase participation in this wonderful sport.

#### Reference

1. Maber-Aleksandrowicz S., Avent C., Hassiotis A. A systematic review of animal-assisted therapy on psychosocial outcomes in people with intellectual disability. *Res. Dev. Disabil.* 2016;49-50:322-338.

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