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Cameron Brown

March 19, 2019

South West Edmonton Minor Soccer Association Board

Edmonton,  
Alberta

SWEMSA Board,

We are writing this formal letter to express our shock and dismay at recent Board decisions that seem to prioritize strict age restrictions over letting school classmates play together at an age where kids play without keeping score, there are no standings or even referees. The whole point of course to make the experience welcoming and enjoyable to young children thereby promoting the great sport of soccer.

This broader goal of inclusion seems to have been lost on a Board when making individual decisions that would make the sport accessible to Grade One classmates; yes, seven-year-old kids, who just want to play together. This is of course, contrary to all nationally recognized best practices for promoting sport for young children, the enclosed recommendations from Canada Sport for Life being just one notable example.

The Grandview Heights U7 team this year is largely composed of a single Grade One class in the community school, and unfortunately has become a stark example of the above concern. Two students from this class have thus far been denied the opportunity to play with their peers. One of the boys, Liam [REDACTED] (DOB December 30, 2011) was denied in both an initial "hearing" and subsequent "appeal" despite being just two days older than the "cutoff". After a hard, recent conversation with Liam, he has decided to abandon the sport of soccer rather than be forced to play U9 out of his depth and away from his friends. For my part, I have made the difficult decision to withdraw my name as U7 coach for Grandview rather than continue to donate my time to such a callously governed organization. This is a direct result of the short-sighted decision making of the Board.

It is clear the Board also failed to consider how recent changes to age brackets may have impacted young players of this age. Sticking with the Liam example, as a five-year-old, he played in U6. The following year, the brackets were changed and he played as a six-year-old in U7. This year, being denied the opportunity to play in U7, he would be forced to play U9. Being a younger child the past two years, Liam was an average player at best and occasionally became discouraged with the sport. The

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primary attraction keeping Liam interested was the ability to play with his friends and classmates. When the Board blocked him from playing with his friends, his choice not to continue to play was entirely predictable.

Outcomes aside, for a Board so inflexible, the disturbing lack of due process around the Boards decision making is also a major concern. The “hearings” for these children simply appeared to be a closed door, quick and uninformed discussion where the requests were summarily dismissed. Neither the players, their parents or the team coaches were advised of the date prior or had the opportunity to attend or present their case. Decisions were therefore made completely lacking context.

When concerns were raised in Liam’s case, the President of SWEMSA advised it would be considered an “appeal” only to repeat the same closed-door process with the same Board; again, without anyone concerned being involved or even given prior notice. Decisions were not provided in writing, in fact no notice providing a decision has ever been received. It appeared to be left to the local volunteer community coordinator to read the minutes for all the meetings to even learn a decision had been rendered and break the news to the players and their family. The lack of proper communication made it nearly impossible to follow the process and understand next steps. Boards should be far more transparent and accountable for their decisions.

Given the above lack of communication, the rationale for decisions or potential next steps were not clear. The whole process seems capricious and arbitrary, and frankly mean spirited. Coaches, players and parents were left with a bad taste in their mouths and little appetite to continue to participate in a sport and organization that places such barriers in the way of participation. Continuing with example of the two excluded Grandview boys, parents were led to understand that a note from the Grade One teacher confirming their status in the class with many of their teammates would be helpful. This was secured and delivered prior to the “hearing” for both boys (purely by chance, as no notice of the date for the hearing was ever provided), only to later be told that was insufficient and some kind of medical reason was needed.

Although no formal reason for the decision was ever delivered, the only thing approaching an explanation ever offered (then only verbally and through intermediaries) was that FIFA rules required such strict segregation of children, even at such young ages. It is all the more concerning then, that the actual rules the Board is using to justify their decision appear to give broad discretion to the Board:

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*ARTICLE 13 RULES & REGULATIONS 1. E.M.S.A. shall support and maintain the principles of the Laws of the Game as established by the Federation International Football Association (F.I.F.A.) except as necessary to: (a) Accommodate regional differences in age categories or climatic conditions. (b) Accommodate physically or mentally challenged athletes. 2. E.M.S.A. may make such Rules & Regulations as may be deemed appropriate to promote, develop, and govern the game of soccer....*

**....4. The Board may grant special dispensations from any Rules or Regulations of E.M.S.A. to any Member or group of Members as may be appropriate having regard to the objectives of the Association.**

The very first Objective listed on the Edmonton Minor Soccer Association website is to “To promote, develop and govern Minor Soccer in the City of Edmonton”; meaning the Board had the option to provide greater flexibility for younger children to play and have fun with their classmates in the interests of growing the sport. Either the Board does not understand or intentionally misrepresented their own rules; a significant concern in either case.

For Liam, the damage is done. The whole experience of wondering if he can play with his friends for the past several months only to be told he cannot, has likely soured him on the sport. Given the opaque nature of the Board and the process, I can only hope that bringing public attention to this issue can bring some sense to the organization. It is my sincere hope for the next group of kids faced with this situation, that they be allowed to play with their classmates under the above individual dispensation until a formal, and more inclusive policy can be adopted at the next Annual General Meeting.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cameron Brown', is placed over a light gray dotted rectangular background.

Cameron Brown

Former Coach, Grandview U7 Team

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