

**2024 MHSAA SOCCER COMMITTEE MINUTES**  
Thursday, January 18, 2024, 9:30 a.m. - East Lansing

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Steve Bossert, Beverly Hills  
Aaron Dean, Grand Haven  
Ethan Felsing, Mason  
Todd Heugh, Troy  
Martha Munsell (Guest/MATS)  
Paige Paulsen, Williamston  
Stacy Punzal, North Farmington  
Chris Riker, Portage (Representative Council)  
Jaime Smith, Maple City  
Ed Uhrik, Fenton

Joel Vandekoppel, Grand Rapids  
Lauren Wetmore, Gladwin  
Bill Wilkinson, Kalamazoo

**VIRTUAL**

Kevin Guzzo, St. Joseph (MIAAA)

**MHSAA STAFF**

Andy Frushour (Recorder)

The 2023-24 MHSAA Soccer Committee met in the John E. "Jack" Roberts MHSAA building to review topics involving soccer and the tournament series. The meeting began with a review of the MHSAA decision-making process and the charge of the Soccer Committee. Agenda items were compiled from correspondence, staff, committee members, and the soccer coaches association.

**DISCUSSION ITEMS**

**SAFETY**

The 2022-23 NFHS RIO Injury Surveillance Study was provided to the committee. In addition to the Emergency Action Plan requirement for 2024-25, schools are encouraged to have a pregame Medical Timeout meeting so coaches know where to turn in case of an emergency. This is already happening prior to many high school football and basketball games.

The committee discussed the perception that high school games are more physical than club games. This could be due to several reasons: a wide range of ages on the pitch in a high school game, the fact that more subs are allowed, some tactical decisions, and collisions and cheap shots are more likely when there is skill disparity on the field. Overall, though, the committee does not see a notable difference in physicality and instead notes that the skill gap is getting closer between the two levels.

**SPORTSMANSHIP**

The safety conversation quickly led to a long discussion about sportsmanship at high school games. Not only do players mimic the dissent of officials in professional games, but the language used by high school students continues to devolve. This is made tougher by the different levels of acceptance by officials, as obscenity is not always cut and dry. What is incidental, and what is vulgar or abusive? Many leagues have asked their officials to crack down on language and rough play, encouraging quicker yellow cards. However, this is not just an athlete issue. Coaches need to keep better control of the bench, and ADs need to be more proactive with fan behavior. Cleaning up soccer might take a cultural shift, and it is a shared responsibility. The 2024-25 rules meeting will emphasize appropriate behavior, with an education-based focus on the soccer field as a classroom.

Yellow card accumulation rules were discussed as a tool for cleaning up behavior and holding players accountable for on-field actions. Several states already have accumulation rules in place. There were questions about who would report the cautions and how the MHSAA would track them, but there was also a concern that sometimes communication between the official and coach/player is a better strategy than showing a yellow. The coaches association has been asked to survey members about a possible accumulation rule, and the MHSAA will seek feedback from AD groups and official associations.

## **PARTICIPATION**

The three-half rule continues to be positively received in the soccer community. Abuse is rarely reported. While the rule is serving its intended purpose of saving subvarsity teams, there are also other benefits: insurance if a goalkeeper is injured, allowing minutes for players slowly returning from injury, and playing time for students not getting enough at the other level.

## **FALL SURVEY REVIEW**

As part of the annual fall Update Meeting tour and AD In-Service program, a survey was conducted with administrators across the state. Four of the survey responses were presented to the committee for discussion, including the Links Rule for incoming freshmen, NIL, and adding a fifth division for sports with more than 550 participating teams.

## **SOCCER ITEMS**

Spring 2023 featured a record number of Limited Team Membership violations (and inquiries), with girls leaving the high school team to play in a club event. There were likely many more girls who violated the rule but did not report the violation -- coaches and ADs must be held accountable. The MHSAA will continue to be transparent in describing the rules and penalties to schools and clubs with the hope of encouraging more girls to play high school soccer. Elite clubs offer their highest-level teams a 10-month schedule with no room for high school to play, but clubs are also providing shorter season options for other teams, which allow girls to play high school soccer in the spring.

In the girls season, club tryouts commonly occur during the MHSAA Regional and Finals weeks. This issue does not affect boys. Girls can go to the tryout and participate in skills and drills, but importantly, they cannot scrimmage. This puts HS coaches in a tough position: they want their kids to make a club team for off-season skill development, but they do not want kids to become ineligible because of the Limited Team Membership rule. The rule allowing scrimmages at a legitimate college ID camp has been helpful, and the committee is open to assisting the official club tryout process. It is not interested in allowing open training sessions, or additional tryout sessions past the original published dates.

There is some coach sentiment that the four-player rule is not effective in a sport like soccer, with 11 players on the pitch at one time. While four might be good for a five-player sport like basketball, the percentage is not the same for soccer. Other committee members argue that the four-player rule is meant for skill development (not full-team tactics/strategy), conditioning and rotations are still allowed, and smaller schools are more concerned with keeping multi-sport athletes instead of giving them a reason to train specifically in one sport.

A number of other issues were discussed. There is a push to shorten the half when one team is already leading by eight goals. While some states differentiate between unsportsmanlike red cards and other red cards for the purpose of the next game penalty, this committee wishes to treat all red cards the same. MHSAA staff should continue to collect information about the facilities of potential host sites, especially those with known poor grass conditions.

## **POSTSEASON TOURNAMENT**

For the first time all four boys Finals were played at one location on the same day. The day was successful by most accounts, with some logistical adjustments already planned for 2024. In addition, due to a court ruling, U.P. teams were included in the state tournament for the first time in about 15 years. Moving forward, Districts that include both L.P. and U.P. teams will automatically use the non-traditional top-line host format, with no pre-determined District host.

Seeding was once again a hot topic, but with a balanced discussion. The pros and cons of seeding all teams within a District were discussed. It has long been known coaches prefer to seed all District teams, as they believe a high seed is a reward for a good season. Others, however, note the postseason is considered a second season for many, and the chance for a lower-seeded team to play

another lower-seeded team, possibly at home, is a great experience for those teams (instead of always matching up against a #1 or #2 seed, which will always be on the road).

### **RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL**

1. Seed all teams in a District using the MPR formula. (7-6)
2. Amend the Limited Team Membership rule for soccer to allow in-season scrimmage participation at club tryouts on published dates that are open to all students. (13-0)
3. Institute a running clock in the first half when the goal differential is eight or more. The clock will not stop for goals, cards, injuries, or other reasons. (13-0)