

Private Clubs and Club Teams – A Risk Management Challenge

Firstly, let's affirm some of the positive benefits that clubs or privately owned/administered sport teams and groups have brought to the sport environment; to begin with they have expanded the number of high performance or elite opportunities for young athletes. Club teams offer an opportunity for young athletes to receive coaching, training assistance and playing opportunities in addition to those provided through community clubs and associations, not for profit local and regional sport groups and provincially delivered or sanctioned sport organizations. They also serve as another option for youth to remain involved in competitive sport after having been cut from a school or community team/club. These privately administered and operated clubs tend to rely on fees paid by the athletes or their families and are not usually the recipients of public funds managed by PSO's, PSGB's or Provincial Sport Organizations. They are also, typically, not directly accountable to those bodies regarding governance, risk management practice and the fostering of respectful environments.

This last point is a challenge. While some club or private sport groups have planned for a respectful sport environment by creating proactive and reactive tools others have chosen to take a 'wait and see' approach in the hope that abuse, bullying, harassment and hazing never take place within their organization. The proactive tools are primarily educative in nature and range from offering workshops on a respectful sport environment (such as the Canadian Red Cross RespectED program), accessing online awareness programs (such as Respect In Sport) for coaches, parents and athletes, dispensing printed information and providing Codes of Conduct or Ethics for all involved with the Club team. Reactive tools include consistent and pre-established dispute resolution policies, fair and open disciplinary practices and guidelines regarding complaint process within the organization (including, when necessary, the process around referral to child protection or criminal justice).

The Support Line (1-866-773-5777) that serves members of Sask Sport, Sport Manitoba, SaskCulture and the SPRA receives calls from a wide variety of sport organizations and related individuals; including calls/emails from parents and others involved in private club team sports. Sometimes we hear concerns raised over such organizations being ill-prepared for complaints or incidents, others have described how a single individual in charge of the club team organization takes it upon themselves to receive, investigate, hear and determine fault with any and call complaints brought forward. This arbitrary process is not typically open or fair and the reasons for decisions are often unclear to athletes and their families. We have heard of several cases now where the complaining child/youth has been asked to leave the club team to avoid 'further conflict' rather than the complaint being taken seriously.

While it is unlikely that the phenomenon of private club teams will go away any time soon (in fact it seems to be expanding into new sports) it would be wise if all parents and athletes who are thinking about involvement understood the potential risks involved. Certainly it is a compliment to a young athlete when they are invited to participate, but the following questions should be asked:

- Does the club team have policies and procedures in place to receive, investigate and hear complaints of abuse, harassment, bullying and hazing?
- Does the club team have a clear protocol for handling and referring appropriate complaints to child protection or criminal justice authorities?
- What recourse do athletes and their families have in the event that their complaint is dismissed without a proper or fair investigation or hearing?
- Does the club or organization provide respectful sport education to all coaches, managers, chaperones, athletes and parents involved?

- Are there clear and relevant codes of conduct (including regarding the appropriate use of electronic technology) for coaches, athletes and parents?

For more information on any of these important aspects of making sport a safer and more respectful environment please call the Red Cross Support Line at 1-866-773-5777.