



An Open Letter About Fields in DC

All Players, Coaches, Parents, and Friends:

As I write this letter we have reached the mid-point of the Spring 2008 season. The weather has been rainy at times, as we expect in the Spring. But we have also had some fine days for soccer. So the season is up and running thanks to our many volunteers. I am also pleased to report that in our Recreational divisions — U5 through High School — we have 4592 registered players this Spring. That represents an all-time high in over 30 years for DC Stoddert Soccer. We can also add to that number over 400 highly committed Developmental Academy and Travel Program players. Congratulations to all. At a time when a lack of activity among our youth is legitimately seen as a public health crisis, we are doing our part and we are doing it well!

In contrast to the good enrollment news, I unfortunately must again address the subject of fields. The bottom line is, despite obvious field resources that go unused or that are not in useable condition, we do not have access to sufficient good fields to meet our needs. And many of the public fields where we do have access remain very poorly maintained. We have tried very hard as an organization to gain access to fields, including through the public schools, city council members, and private schools. We have tried to make in-kind donations for field maintenance. The net result: we have had some limited success, but not enough. Depending on where you play each weekend, the situation can vary tremendously. Overall, however, like many of you who play at certain locations, we are frustrated with the state of affairs. Let me highlight just a few of the facts.

On the positive side, we were fortunate to gain access this season to a new all-weather field at Maret School. We are very thankful to the school for this. The Girls High School division benefits from this full sized field on Saturdays. This comes at a cost, but we recognize that private facilities need to charge reasonable fees for maintenance and capital costs associated with their fields. While this puts clear pressure on our organization's finances and fee structure, we are soundly managed and will make prudent and fiscally responsible decisions to gain access to fields.

In contrast, Fort Reno remains a mess — unimproved, unused, and not even permitted for use. This has historically been a huge asset for our programs, especially for 7 and 8 year olds on Saturdays and for weekday practices across many ages. We no longer can even speculate when that situation will change.

We also have the truly bizarre situation with respect to the new artificial turf fields at DC Public Schools. As you may know, the District embarked on a publicly-funded effort to install new turf fields at five public high schools — including Wilson, Roosevelt, and Coolidge, which are in areas of the city where DC Stoddert Soccer draws players and plays games. I believe strongly that when the city undertook this initiative, it did so with the understanding that the improved fields would serve not only the school athletic programs, but the greater community. That greater community includes non-profit youth sports programs like ours that fill an important niche in providing services to children in the city.

Indeed, with respect to new fields the model in other jurisdictions, such as Arlington County and McLean in very recent years, has been to install artificial turf fields at parks and high schools for school and community use. We know for a fact that these new fields are permitted to the youth soccer clubs on weekends and at other times (when not needed by the schools) at no cost (other than the nominal permit fee) to the youth programs.

So what happened here? Once the school projects were completed last Summer, the fields were not made available for public use in the Fall. Despite repeated efforts to gain some access, we were rebuffed. This was particularly troublesome at Wilson because our programs include hundreds of children from Wilson as well as Alice Deal Middle School and the feeder elementary schools. We are “in the neighborhood,” the students play in our programs, yet we could not use the field. Our parents were mystified. Judging by the e-mail we receive, the assumption among our community has been that “Stoddert” (a largely volunteer organization) is somehow incompetent.

Based in part on the support of some of our parents who are also part of the Wilson community, during the Winter and for the Spring we were presented a new deal for access to Wilson. Suffice it to say, this deal was not what we had hoped. It is not the Arlington or McLean model, to say the least. It is a pay per hour or per game policy — at rates that the Wilson management team incorrectly believes are “market rates.” That is, the Wilson team believes these are the rates that would be charged by private owners (e.g., private schools or the Maryland Soccer Foundation in Germantown). The rates, however, far exceed what we are paying for private school access or for access at George Washington University!! Our District-based parents are, in effect, being asked to pay again for the field improvement initiative. And, while we expect to pay maintenance fees, we simply cannot afford to pay hourly rates that would lead to fees in the tens of thousands of dollars per year — for a public high school field! Increasing fees substantially would defeat the purpose of a widely-available recreational sports program.

The bottom line is that we have not been using Wilson this Spring for Recreational games. We are using it only for a limited number of Travel program practices where the fees are being directly borne by the players on the teams — an unfair result but one the teams feel necessary to stay competitive in regional play. In the end, this situation is a lost opportunity for the school to serve the community, and a lost opportunity for our players.

At Roosevelt and Coolidge the response has been even less welcoming. We have simply been denied access to the fields. So at Takoma Rec, for example, our Coed U14-U15 division plays on Saturdays on the muddy, grassless, and un-maintained recreational field next door to the vacant and pristine Coolidge high school field installed at taxpayer expense. Why? We don't know.

As I hope you know, DC Stoddert Soccer is a non-profit youth sports program. We are self-supporting and rely on no funding from the city. We support scholarships for any child that cannot afford to pay. In Recreational soccer, this amounts to substantial foregone revenue subsidized by the rest of our budget. In Travel soccer, our scholarship and outreach commitment amounts to over \$50,000 in direct subsidies per year. We are also a very large financial supporter of the DC Scores program (a nationally recognized after-school reading and soccer program). Our only reliance on the government (and other parties) is for access to fields to run our programs. We are, quite simply, not getting the support we need and that we deserve.

What can you do? Please send an e-mail to City Council members asking for access to public school fields. Please let your ANC know that we need support so that children can play (such as by eliminating unreasonable weekend use restrictions on private fields).

There is no program like ours in the city. With 5,000 players playing two seasons per year, we should not be ignored. I am asking all of you for some help so that we can be heard. Please do this now.

I have pasted below a link that will take you to the City Council members. Clicking on each name will take you to individual e-mail addresses:

<http://www.dccouncil.washington.dc.us/members.html>

Many thanks for your continuing support.

David Repka
Chairman
DC Stoddert Soccer

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