

# Going through the motions

By BERNIE PUCHALSKI

In my previous incarnation as a news reporter with the Niagara Falls Review, I attended and reported on more meetings than any person should be subjected to in one lifetime.

As the regional reporter, I covered all the meetings of regional council, the polices services board and the Niagara District Health Council. When people were off , I also filled in at meetings of the local hydro board and the Greater Niagara General Hospital. One day, as I sat through a mind-numbing, three-hour Niagara Region planning committee meeting something snapped inside my brain and I ran out of regional headquarters screaming incoherently.

When I was found three weeks later, wrapped around the flag on the 12th green at The Greens at Brock, I pleaded with my bosses never to send me to another meeting. The newsroom bosses decided to do what they always did with screwups and/or malcontents -- move them into the sports department where the only ones they could hurt would be themselves.

Fourteen years later, I continue to be gainfully employed in the sports department of The Standard where, much to my surprise, I found myself spearheading a campaign to allow the media to attend the semi-annual meetings of the Niagara Region High School Athletic Association.

I had informally made the request on at least four previous occasions and didn't pursue it when I wasn't given a response. My desire to attend these meetings was rekindled by the response of the NRHSAA to a column I wrote critical of the newly formed AAA/AAAA football league. Below is part of its response:

"Believe me when I say that football was very broken. As an outsider, you would not have been privy to that information."

I fired back a response which included the following:

"Maybe if I was able to listen in on the debate surrounding the issues and how the decisions were made, this 'outsider' would have a better understanding of why things are done."

Shortly afterwards, I enlisted the support of the sports editors of the Welland Tribune and the Niagara Falls Review and drafted a formal request to the NRHSAA, asking that the media be allowed to attend its semi-annual meetings.

Its response was no, but said it would issue a news release after the meetings on items that have become policy through motions.

In my eyes, it's not good enough to report a sanitized and censored version of the news.

Here's why we want to attend meetings. When a motion is debated, the media will hear the arguments for and against it. When we write our stories on controversial issues, we will include the reasons why people voted for it, why people voted against it and ultimately the decision made by the NRHSAA. This allows the public-- the people who are funding high school sport -- to come to their own conclusions and decide whether or not to agree with the decision or to rally against it.

It's called democracy and it happens at every other meeting of both District School Board of Niagara and the Niagara Catholic District School Board.

As with all committees and boards, there would obviously be an in-camera portion of the meeting to protect the privacy of individuals and institutions.

I asked for a response to the decision from both major schools boards in Niagara and only the DSBN replied. It stated the DSBN considers the NRHSAA an arm's-length organization, that it is not an official committee of the board and does not report directly to a board and that the DSBN respects the ability of the NRHSAA to decide upon and maintain its constitution.

The DSBN also stated it didn't have a single budget figure for how much money is spent on secondary school athletics and that each school is given a budget and they paid for sports from that budget.

I don't know about you, but I want the board to have way more than an arm's-length relationship with my tax dollars and how they are spent on high school sports, and I want the decisions of the NRHSAA reviewed by a school board committee of elected rather than appointed officials.

So what did happen at Monday's semi-annual meeting of the NRHSAA? I would love to be able to tell you first-hand, but I wasn't there, so you'll have to hear it second-hand from an NRHSAA member who attended the meeting.

The first order of business was discussing my request. It was acknowledged I had made a few good points and then the meeting was told that Southern Ontario Secondary Schools Association Zone 1 also does not allow media to attend meetings. Opinion from another region stated that athletic associations weren't public, there was no Freedom of Information Act requirements to worry about, and that associations issued media releases to show a united front. There was then a bit of talk about in-camera sessions before a few association members got up to question which member of the association had leaked a copy of the meeting's agenda to The Standard.

After more discussion, a show of hands was asked and almost all the association members decided they didn't want the media present at meetings.

Next up was discussion and debate on the 23 motions before the meeting. Below are some of the more interesting and noteworthy decisions:

Motion 13 dealt with the fact that football scores weren't being reported to the convener and he had to get them from the newspaper. A motion was passed to have a football scoresheet, listing scores, penalties ejections, etc., and eligibility sheets sent in at the end of each game.

This motion is interesting because the NRHSAA

constitution already addresses that issue, stipulating a \$20 fine for failing to report game scores within two days, except for the final week of the season. It is now the second time I know of this season that football hasn't adhered to the NRHSAA constitution, the first coming when the AAA/AAAA League decided not to follow the tie-breaking formula found in the constitution.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I do believe the reason why the NRHSAA wanted the former "renegade" Varsity Football League under its umbrella was so it would have to follow the constitution.

Just wondering....

Thankfully, two motions were defeated that would have excluded athletes from playing a sport at the next closest school if their home school didn't offer the specific sport. What was passed is that a map used by the Niagara School Transportation Services would be included in the constitution to determine which was the next closest school.

Another "scary" motion was tabled that would have excluded parents from attending NRHSAA protest, appeal or sanction meetings which involved their children. The motion started with the statement: "Whereas the inclusion of parents at an NRHSAA protest, appeal or sanction meeting may not be appropriate." The

mover was the association's protest and sanctions committee and the seconder was the NRHSAA board of reference general executive.

Any discussion would be most interesting and newsworthy to parents of high school athletes.

Well that concludes going through the motions.

What's next? Will it be a column questioning why there aren't parents, outside coaches and, most importantly, students sitting as voting members of the NRHSAA?

Maybe not. I'm getting a repetitive strain injury from stirring the pot.