

Access denied: Media not welcome at athletic association meetings

By BERNIE PUCHALSKI , STANDARD STAFF

Meetings of the Niagara Region High School Athletic Association will continue to be held away from the eyes of the media and general public.

At its semi-annual meeting Monday, the NRHSAA denied a request for media access to the meeting made by the sports editors of the Welland Tribune, St. Catharines Standard and Niagara Falls Review.

Members of the media had informally asked to attend the meeting in the past, but this was the first time a written request had been submitted.

"If we are able to hear the debate on issues, it would allow us to understand all the implications of decisions and write more 'fact-based' accounts of changes," the request read. "By reporting promptly on changes in a public forum, it would provide parents, students, outside coaches and even members of your own association with the information needed to make informed choices."

By a show of hands at the meeting, the NRHSAA denied the request Monday.

"It was a discussion, but then we asked for a show of hands for what was felt. The representatives of all five boards felt it would be in the best interest of the meeting itself just to have members only," NRHSAA spokesperson Rina Rode said.

The NRHSAA is made up of 35 representatives from Confederation, Jean Vanier, independent school boards, the District School Board of Niagara and the Niagara Catholic District School Board.

"The designates are very capable men and women," said Rode, who is the paid athletic convenor for secondary school athletics and has no vote. "They're passionate about what they do, they're volunteers and they are giving up countless hours to try to do what's best for athletes and what's best for athletes in one school may not be what's best for athletes in another school. There's just so many different situations."

Instead of the media being allowed to attend the meetings, the NRHSAA has decided to provide a press release after the semi-annual meetings. The releases will provide information on items that have become policy through motions. Members of the media will be allowed to attend meetings to make presentations and give information from a media perspective, but the meeting itself is for members of the NRHSAA only -- designates, principals, convenors.

"It was felt that there was no legal obligation to invite the press to meetings. Often times, there's issues that can be sensitive in nature and also to protect the privacy of students, coaches, schools, confidentiality issues, etc, etc.," Rode said.

The NRHSAA believes having media present would stifle debate.

It was also felt that maybe having the press there might somehow hamstring some of the discussion and decisions because people might feel uncomfortable to express them," Rode said. "Open and honest dialogue amongst a committed group of colleagues is what makes this organization as strong as it is."

Meetings of the NRHSAA have always been for members only and that point is underlined and written in bold face in the association's constitution.

All meetings of the DSBN and NCDSB are open to the public, but the DSBN considers the NRHSAA an "arm's-length organization made up of members from school boards across Niagara.

"It is not an official committee of the board and does not report directly to a board committee," wrote Brett Sweeney, a DSBN communications officer.

"As an organization, the NRHSAA is able to set and maintain its own constitution, which reads that 'general meetings are open to members only.' This is the format that the membership has determined best fits their needs and will allow them to most effectively work in the best interests of students in Niagara. The DSBN respects the ability of the NRHSAA to decide upon and maintain its constitution," Sweeney said.

Sweeney was unable to provide a figure for how much money the DSBN allocates each year for secondary school athletics.

"The DSBN doesn't have a single number available that would encompass the cost of secondary athletics. Schools are allocated a budget by the board and they pay for athletics through that budget."

The Catholic board did not provide a response to the NRHSAA's decision.

One outside coach, who didn't want to be identified, wasn't happy with the NRHSAA's decision.

"The decision to not allow the media into the NRHSAA meetings is certainly disappointing and disconcerting. Allowing the media access will provide full transparency as well as a better understanding of the decisions made. There definitely appears to be dissenting opinions from decisions that have been made recently. Why not allow a forum for everyone to decide the best course of action? Shouldn't this be in the best interest of the kids?"