

Suburban Friendship League
**Discussion Topics and Proposed Rule and
Process Changes for the Spring 2021 Season**
(as of January 30, 2021)

As we noted in our December 17, 2020, Email, the SFL plans on resuming normal operations for the Spring 2021 season. Several clubs have contacted us and asked for us to provide more specific guidance on our plans. If the Governor says “No,” to youth athletics then we do not play. However, the SFL Commissioners do not believe that is a likely outcome since youth athletics was allowed, or at least tolerated, in some form during the fall and at least some school jurisdictions are planning on resuming in person classes. Some clubs appear to desire more “certainty” that the SFL would resume operations than the December 17, 2020, Email provided. In an attempt to provide this “certainty,” we found it useful to focus on the questions that the SFL believes need to be answered. This paper provides those questions along with a discussion of the proposed actions related to the questions. As noted in these discussions, several of the questions require the clubs to provide some critical information to the SFL by February 15, 2021. In some cases, the discussions state that changes to the existing rules, procedures, and process documents (commonly referred to as “rules”) are needed.

The following high level questions were considered.

- What happens if clubs do not register enough teams?
- What registration deadlines should be used?
- Will the tournament be scheduled?
- How will the SFL assign teams to divisions since it has been a year since the SFL has seen any play between the teams from different clubs?
- How will the SFL ensure compliance with state, local, VYSA, and club COVID related guidelines?
- What is the SFL policy if a team has identified COVID cases associated with the players, coaches, family members of the players, or spectators?
- Can a team decide not to play a team from another area because that team believes the other team or area is “high risk?”
- Will cancelled games be automatically rescheduled regardless of the reason for the cancellation, i.e., are weather cancellations treated the same as COVID related cancellations?

The following discusses each question and the SFL's current thoughts. Attachment I contains the proposed rule changes that will be included as an attachment to the Club and Coach Guide for the Spring 2021 season. Hopefully, in the Fall, these changes will not longer be needed. The SFL did not identify any changes that warranted permanent changes to our rules documents.

Question – What happens if clubs do not register enough teams?

Discussion

Although the SFL has committed to resume normal operations for the Spring season, if clubs do not register enough teams, then it is impracticable for the SFL to resume normal scheduling activities. One club that has a large number of teams has already told us that they do not plan to reenter the SFL for the Spring 2021 season and have decided that they will join some other SFL Clubs to form their own informal group where all parties believe the COVID risks are reduced. Another club with a large number of teams has told us that they are considering not continuing their relationship with the SFL since after their Fall 2020 experience, they believe it is more cost effective to keep their program in house or just work with neighboring clubs. As we have discussed before, the SFL only exists if the clubs believe that it provides a valuable service that should be continued.

Before the SFL can provide reasonable assurance that it will resume normal operations, it must know whether the clubs are going to use its services. Accordingly, the SFL is requesting each club to confirm by February 15, 2021, on whether they plan on entering their teams into the SFL for the Spring 2021 season. If a response is not received or a club cannot make this commitment by February 15, 2021, then the SFL will conclude that no teams will be entered.

Important: We are not asking for the number of teams a given club will be entering on February 15, 2021. Rather we are asking for a commitment on (1) whether teams will be registered and (2) the age groups that will be entered.

We recognize that we still may not have enough teams when team registrations are submitted. However, if we can tell that the clubs do not plan on entering enough teams now, then all clubs will know what will happen in the Spring on February 15 rather than waiting until the middle of March. **PLEASE DO NOT TELL THE SFL “YES” TO KEEP YOUR OPTIONS OPEN. IF THERE IS ANY QUESTION, THEN WE SHOULD BE TOLD “NO” OR “UNDECIDED.”**

Question – What registration deadlines should be used?

Discussion

As noted in the December 17, 2020, Email, the SFL assumed that it would use the standard dates contained in the rule documents. However, because of the uncertainties associated with player

registration, the clubs may want more time to finalize their team submissions. Accordingly, the SFL is proposing, like it did for the Fall 2020 season, two options for the clubs to consider. We would also like responses from the clubs by February 15, 2021, on which option they would like us to use. If we do not receive a response, then we will assume that the club prefers Option 1 below.

Option 1

Delay the deadlines for team registration by one week, i.e., initial submissions would still be due on March 1, however, the clubs would have until March 17 to finalize their teams. The game start would be delayed by one week to April 17. Teams would be scheduled for 8 regular season games and no tournament would be held. The reason the decision to schedule 8 regular season games rather than 7 regular season games plus the tournament is because we have questions on whether enough games will actually be played to support a tournament because of the cancellation policies discussed below.

Option 2

Retain the current schedule shown on the web site, i.e., March 1 deadline for initial submissions and March 10 for final team submissions. Under this option, an 8-week regular season would be scheduled and, should enough games get played, a tournament would be scheduled. If enough games are not played to support the tournament, then the tournament weekend would be used for make up games as determined by the teams. As noted below, the SFL is not planning on using the automatic game rescheduling process this season.

Question – Will the tournament be scheduled?

Discussion

As discussed elsewhere, the decision on whether the tournament will be scheduled depends on (1) which option the clubs decide to use for team registration and (2) how many games are played if a decision is made to use the standard team registration and game schedule (option 2 above). If option 1 above is selected, then no tournament will be scheduled. If option 2 is selected, then the existing rules govern whether the tournament will be scheduled. As noted in Section XI.B. of the Club and Coach Guide the tournament will only be scheduled when a majority of the regular season games have been played when it is time to schedule the tournament.

“A majority of regular season games will be considered played if scores have been received for 80 percent of the games that were originally expected to be played at the start of the season by the tournament scheduling date. For example, assume the SFL has 500 registered teams. Accordingly, about 250 games can be expected to be played each game week. If, on average, less than 200 games are played each week, then the tournament will not be scheduled and the weekend reserved for the tournament will be used to make up games.”

As discussed elsewhere, we have questions on whether a sufficient number of games will be played when it is time to schedule the tournament because of (1) the liberal game cancellation policy that is being adopted and (2) the elimination of the automatic game rescheduling requirement this season.

Question – How will the SFL assign teams to divisions since it has been a year since the SFL has seen any play between the teams from different clubs?

Discussion

The existing rules cover this situation. The SFL normally makes a recommendation on division placement and the clubs are free to make the actual division assignment. The SFL will make no recommendation on division assignment for the Spring 2021 season and the recommendation submitted by the clubs will be used. If the number of teams in a division is less than 10 teams, then the age group will only have one division. Also, should an age group have less than 10 teams then the clubs will be notified and the SFL will not schedule any teams in that age group.

Question – How will the SFL ensure compliance with state, local, VYSA, and club COVID related guidelines?

Discussion

This seems like an impossible task for the SFL. Based on observations of some travel games from last fall, the stated guidelines were not followed in many cases. The SFL already receives complaints about how the other team does not follow SFL rules, etc., and it appears reasonable that the SFL will receive Emails about how the other team did not follow the applicable COVID rules and that their team and its spectators were placed needlessly at risk. Accordingly, changes to the SFL rules are warranted and included in the attached proposed changes to the existing rules.

- Each club must provide the SFL its COVID related protocols for its home games prior to the final deadline for team registration (March 10 or 17). Failure to provide this information will automatically result in the club's teams being dropped from the SFL. These guidelines will be published in the season package.
- Each team will be required to comply with the home team's COVID related protocols or its club's protocols whichever is stricter.
- Failure of a team, coaching staff, or the team's spectators to following the applicable COVID related guidelines must be reported to the SFL by 6 P.M. on the Monday following the game. The SFL will then forward the complaints to the applicable SFL Club Representative for review. The SFL Club Representative will be required to respond to the SFL on the results of the club's review of the allegations and the

recommended penalties that should be assessed to the team. Should the allegations have merit, then the minimum penalty is a one game scheduling forfeit for the game played and should a team have two forfeits assessed for COVID related infractions, the remainder of their games will be cancelled. If the club does not provide a response to the SFL by 6 P.M. on the Wednesday following the game, the SFL will assume that the allegations have merit and will automatically assess the team a scheduling forfeit.

Question – What is the SFL policy if a team has identified COVID cases associated with the players, coaches, family members of the players, or spectators?

Discussion

As noted elsewhere, each club must provide the SFL its COVID related protocols. These protocols should include the club's policies and procedures related to this situation. In addition, the following changes to the proposed rules appear warranted.

- The SFL Club Representative is required to inform the SFL of any player, coach, parent, spectator that has been diagnosed with COVID, and complete team information, i.e., team name and age group, along with when the individual was diagnosed with the virus. The club should not provide the name(s) for privacy reasons. The SFL will then inform the SFL Club Representative of the opposing team(s) of the diagnoses.
- Any individual diagnosed with COVID, or in contact with an individual that is diagnosed with COVID, may not attend practices or games for at least 2 game weeks after the diagnosis. For example, assume that a player's family member is diagnosed with COVID on the Monday following the week 3 game. This player may not (1) participate in practices or games until after the week 5 game has been played assuming the individual has been tested and the results were negative immediately prior to the week 5 game and (2) may not be in contact with any other team members or coaches during this two-week period.
- Each club should have an effective system to support contact tracing should a COVID case that may affect one of that club's teams surface. One approach the club can use is to have the coach, or other designated official, provide a list of players and individuals that attended that team's games to their SFL Club Representative each week.
- Teams that are unable to field enough players for COVID related reasons must notify the other team as soon as possible that the game will need to be cancelled. The teams and clubs must make a good faith effort to reschedule the games, however, the automatic game rescheduling process will not be required or used. Accordingly, no scheduling forfeits will be assessed if the games are not played, i.e., the games will remain unscheduled. However, the requirement in the current rules relating to how many games

must be played in order to have the tournament and how many games a team must play to be eligible for the tournament will remain in effect.

Question – Can a team decide not to play a team from another area because that team believes the other team or area is “high risk?”

Discussion

As noted elsewhere some clubs have expressed concerns about playing teams from other clubs because those clubs reside in areas shown to have high infection rates. For example, we recently looked at the current confirmed rates of infections (based on the population of the county) for DC and Northern Virginia and found the rates ranged from a 4.7 percent to 7.2 percent (<https://www.cnn.com/resources/coronavirus-information/>). We understand the concerns and have decided to relax the requirements for game cancellations and rescheduling for the Spring 2021 season. The following changes to the proposed rules appear warranted.

- A team may decide to cancel a game with any other team because of COVID related concerns as long as the opposing team and SFL are notified of the game termination prior to 6 P.M. on the Wednesday preceding the game schedule date. If a team decides to cancel a game after this deadline, then the team will be assessed a scheduling forfeit.
- Games canceled for COVID or any other reasons are encouraged to be rescheduled by the teams in accordance with the existing rules. However, the SFL will not implement the automatic game rescheduling process for unscheduled games or assess scheduling forfeits should a game be unable to be rescheduled.

**Special Rules Adopted for
the Spring 2021 Season**

The SFL and clubs have identified a number of unique rules, procedures, and processes (commonly referred to as rules) that appear warranted because of the current COVID conditions. Rather than make the temporary changes in the various documents, it was decided that all changes would be included as an attachment to the Club and Coach Guide for the Spring 2021 season. The rules below supercede the rules contained in other SFL documents unless otherwise stated.

- I. **Compliance with state, local, VYSA, and club COVID related guidelines** – The SFL does not have the resources needed to ensure compliance with applicable COVID guidelines without the clubs and teams being part of the solution.
 - A. Each club must provide the SFL its COVID related protocols for its home games prior to the final deadline for team registration (March 10 or 17). Failure to provide this information will automatically result in the club’s teams being dropped from the SFL. These guidelines will be published in the season package and web site.
 - B. Each team is required to comply with the home team’s COVID related protocols or its club’s protocols whichever is stricter.
 - C. Failure of a team, coaching staff, or the team’s spectators to following the applicable COVID related guidelines must be the reported to the SFL by 6 P.M. on the Monday following the game.
 1. The SFL will forward COVID related complaints to the applicable SFL Club Representative for review.
 - a. The SFL Club Representative is required to respond to the SFL on the results of the club’s review of the allegations and the recommended penalties that should be assessed to the team.
 - (1) Should the allegations have merit, then the minimum penalty is a one game scheduling forfeit for the game that was played.
 - (a) Should a team have two forfeits assessed for COVID related infractions, the reminder of their games will be cancelled.

(2) If the club does not provide a response to the SFL by 6 P.M. on the Wednesday following the game, the SFL will assume that the allegations have merit and will automatically assess the team a scheduling forfeit for the game that was played.

- D. It is our understanding that after the game handshakes are prohibited by most of the soccer clubs. We consider this a best practice and they should not be used after SFL games.
- E. As noted in the SFL's Administrative Rules for the Laws of the Game (Section XII.), at least an automatic two game suspension is required when a red card is issued for "spitting." During the Spring 2021 season, if a player takes deliberate actions that could be considered endangering another player by transmitting the virus to that player, e.g., spitting, coughing, etc., then the suspension will be for the remainder of the season regardless of whether the player committing the infraction is infected or not.

II. COVID related notifications and reporting requirements

- A. SFL Club Representatives are required to inform the SFL of any player, coach, parent, spectator that has been diagnosed with COVID, and complete team information, i.e., team name and age group, along with when the individual was diagnosed with the virus. **The club should not provide the name(s) for privacy reasons.** The SFL will then inform the SFL Club Representative of the opposing team(s) of the diagnoses.
- B. Any individual diagnosed with COVID, or in contact with an individual that is diagnosed with COVID, may not attend practices or games for at least 2 game weeks after the diagnosis.

Example

Assume that a player's family member is diagnosed with COVID on the Monday following the week 3 games. This player may not (1) participate in practices or games until after the week 5 game has been played assuming the individual has been tested and the results were negative immediately prior to the week 5 game and (2) may not be in contact with any other team members or coaches during this two-week period.

- C. It is up to the SFL Club Representative to have an effective system to support contact tracing should a COVID case that may affect one of that club's teams surface. One approach the club can use is to have the coach, or other designated official, provide a list of players and individuals that attended that team's games to their SFL Club Representative each week.

III. Game cancellations and rescheduling cancelled games.

A. Game cancellations

1. Teams that are unable to field enough players for COVID related reasons must notify the other team and SFL as soon as possible that the game will need to be cancelled.
2. Some clubs have expressed concerns about playing teams from other clubs because those clubs reside in areas shown to have high infection rates. For example, current confirmed rates of infections (based on the population of the county) can be found at <https://www.cnn.com/resources/coronavirus-information/>. A team may decide to cancel a game with any other team because of COVID related concerns as long as the opposing team and SFL are notified of the game termination prior to 6 P.M. on the Wednesday preceding the game schedule date. If a team decides to cancel a game after this deadline, then the team will be assessed a scheduling forfeit.

B. Rescheduling games

1. The teams and clubs must make a good faith effort to reschedule the games canceled for COVID or any other reason, e.g., weather, in accordance with the existing rules.
2. The automatic game rescheduling process discussed elsewhere in the rules will not be required or used. Accordingly, no scheduling forfeits will be assessed if unscheduled games are not played, i.e., the games will remain unscheduled.
 - a. The requirement in the current rules relating to how many games must be played in order to have the tournament and how many games a team must play to be eligible for the tournament will remain in effect.