

Hello Sterling Soccer,

Just when you thought this year couldn't get any weirder... First off, let me apologize for the length of this communication...this is going to take a while. There's a lot of very important information in here. The Sterling Youth Soccer Board has planned/discussed/deliberated for many, many hours over the phone, via email, and through Zoom. Please read carefully. Let's get going, full "Q&A" style...

So, why the long email?

As you all know, the State of Massachusetts has issued a series of guidance and standards for youth sports during the Covid pandemic. The specific organization, the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) (I know...I hadn't heard of them either until this Covid mess) has issued safety standards for youth sports for Phase III of the reopening process on July 6th, amended them on July 24th, and recently amended them again on August 13th. Prior to the most recent amendment, soccer was classified as "Moderate Risk" but allowed soccer to continue with relatively simple changes to the surroundings of the game (masks/spacing on the bench, spectators spaced and limited, etc.) but largely left the activities on the field intact.

Oh no, this is going to be a long one. Can I get a quick summary of the big news in the beginning? I promise I'll keep reading.

You got it. All the details are below, but here is the ultimate summary:

- Grade PreK/K: Canceled for Fall 2020.
- Grade 1/2: Grade 1 is canceled. Grade 2 option is available.
- Grade 3/4: Switched to In-Town Program.
- Grade 5/6: Switched to In-Town Program.
- Grade 7/8: Participating in MAYS (with required rules changes)
- High School: Combined with other Wachusett towns. Refer to Holden program for more information.
- All PreK – G1 players **must** complete this form ([PreK-G1 Form](#)) for refunds. Please see below for refund options.
- All Grade 2 – Grade 8 players **must** complete this form ([G2-G8 Form](#)) to indicate if you will/won't be playing. Please review all the information below prior to making your decision.

What changed on August 13th?

This new guidance **mandated rules modifications** in order to allow the sport to continue. A summary of the changes and impact is below, but I would encourage you to review the official document from the State for all the information (follow [this link](#)). Whenever reasonable, I've included direct quotes from the official documents.

The State mandates require organizations to:

- Identify measures that can be implemented to significantly limit contact and increase physical distancing. Modify play and practice as much as possible to keep players spaced 6 feet apart for the majority of a game or practice.

Some of the measures specifically called out by the State include:

- Eliminate Deliberate Contact: Deliberate close contact must be eliminated. Deliberate close contact includes but is not limited to collisions, body checking, tackling, blocking, and racing/riding in packs.



- Minimize Intermittent Contact: Game situations that result in intermittent close physical or face-to-face contact must be modified or eliminated, including: restarts, face-offs, throw-ins, scrums for the ball/puck, or similar activities.
- Some sports by their nature involve intense aerobic activity throughout play. For these sports, it is required that players use facial coverings when possible, taking frequent breaks when they are out of proximity to other players using caution to avoid touching the front or inside of the face covering by using the ties or ear loops to remove and replace. For example, soccer players should have facial coverings with them at all times, and where possible play with the facial covering on, removing it for long runs down the field, for plays without close contact, and in the goal; baseball/softball batters must wear facial coverings while at bat; lacrosse or hockey players participating in face-offs must wear facial coverings. Participants for all sports must wear facial coverings on the bench at all times and in any huddles or time-outs.

These guidelines seem pretty general, what does this mean for soccer specifically?

As a result of this new guidance from the State, Mass Youth Soccer issued updated rules modifications to comply with the State requirements. Similar to the State guidance, I would encourage you to read the document from Mass Youth Soccer for yourself (follow [this link](#)). Some of the key changes include:

- Shoulder to shoulder, or any other intentional physical contact, is not allowed.
- Slide tackling within 6 feet of another player is not allowed.
- Throw-ins are replaced with kick-ins (ball can't be kicked into the penalty area).
- Corner kicks are replaced with kick-ins (ball can't be kicked into the penalty area).
- For all restarts (including kick-ins), all players must comply with 6-foot distancing from both teammates and opponents. Opponents must remain 10 yds from ball prior to kick.

In addition to rules changes, there are also requirements for coaches and parents

- No more than 25 players/coaches/referees on any field.
- No more than 50 people, excluding players/coaches/referees, surrounding the field.
- No more than 1 spectator per player.
 - Note that a spectator is defined as a parent/chaperone/guardian over the age of 18.
 - A spectator may have other children with them, provided the children are with them at all times.
- Spectators must wear facial coverings at all times AND must maintain 6 feet of social distancing.
- Coaches, referees and other officials must wear facial coverings AND maintain 6 feet of social distancing at all times.
- Coaches are responsible for enforcing mask usage by their team members. It is expected that masks will be worn **as much as possible** unless there is a documented medical condition or disability.

Is there any leeway or wiggle room on these requirements?

No. These are mandated by the State and our governing organization (Mass Youth Soccer). We have to follow everything if we want to play. No exceptions. If we have any players, coaches or spectators that are not following the rules during the season, they will be asked to either follow the rules or leave.

So what does that mean for the season?

The end result is that there will be many changes and the impact is different for every age group. Sterling Youth Soccer has historically covered players from PreK through High School, so these types of requirements are obviously going to impact each level differently. There was a lot of careful consideration of all the factors to create the best possible season for each age group.



PreK/K Group

We are very sad to announce that this program is canceled for 2020. Given the nature of soccer at this age group, we didn't feel that it was really possible to maintain the appropriate spacing and mask usage to keep the program safe for the players. This would also have put a tremendous burden on the coaches. We are discussing potential options for a spring program for this group. Obviously nothing is finalized, but stay tuned.

Grade 1/2 Group

We have decided to take a different approach here and split this group in half. Similar to PreK/K, we will be canceling the program for Grade 1 for all of the same reasons. For Grade 2, we have decided to allow 2nd graders to "play up" with the Grade 3/4 group (see below). There can be quite a difference between 1st and 2nd graders and we feel there are quite a few 2nd graders that can probably handle the Grade 3/4 environment, especially when there isn't another option.

However, we ask all parents of 2nd graders to please consider the general ability/maturity of your player during the decision-making process. Since there will be minimal contact with the Covid-rules there is less impact from the size difference between the different ages, however balls will still be kicked (hard) and collisions may occur from time-to-time. Additionally, every team will likely have 2nd, 3rd and 4th graders and they all will need to follow the rules, including distancing and mask requirements.

Grade 2/3/4 Group

We have decided to move our Grade 3/4 program "in-town" and we will not be registering with MAYS. Additionally, we will be allowing 2nd graders to "play up" into this division for this season (see above). This decision to not register with MAYS was made for several reasons:

- The rule changes occurred very late in the planning process and caught us completely off guard. The MAYS registration deadline wasn't going to allow us to properly form teams and be ready for the season.
- Players have been continuing to reach out to join for the fall season but our teams are generally full and we were beginning to turn players away. This approach allows us to continue to accept players that otherwise would have missed out on the season.
- Reduced travel distances is a recommendation from the State and CDC to minimize potential exposure and spread.

The following are the general expectations for the league.

- The season will begin mid-September, likely with first games on 9/19 (but still to be confirmed).
- There will be a boys division and a girls division. This will not be co-ed.
- Attempts will be made to balance all teams. Unlike MAYS, there won't be Division 2 or Division 3.
- Games will be played on the same size field and goals as Grade 3/4, however the number of players may be slightly modified based on team sizes which we won't know until registrations are complete.
- The season will be more game-focused than typical. The challenges from Covid make practice activities a bit more challenging than normal. Additionally, we will need more "head coaches" since we're attempting to have additional teams. By focusing on games, we'll be reducing some of the burden on the coaches since we also expect practices will be harder to manage while maintaining all the necessary mask and distancing requirements.



- Players will use their Sterling Youth Soccer jersey, or similar colored shirt, as their uniform. Players will also be issued a pinnie for their own personal use during the season (shared pinnies are not allowed).

Some major advantages of this approach:

- All of your games will be in Sterling. Everyone loves home games more than away games.
- All of your teammate and competitors will be from surrounding towns (Sterling, Princeton and West Boylston). Princeton and West Boylston players have joined Sterling since their towns canceled their soccer programs for the season.
- Players will be running and kicking soccer balls around with their friends.

Grade 5/6 Group

Just like Grade 2/3/4, we have decided to move our Grade 5/6 program “in-town” and we will not be registering with MAYS. This decision was made for the same reasons as Grade 2/3/4 (see above). The following are the general expectations and advantages for the league are nearly the same as Grade 2/3/4. The major difference is:

- Games will be “small-sided” and played on the same size field and goals as Grade 3/4. This will enable us to create more teams to have a league-atmosphere. Depending on the final team configurations, games could be 6v6 or 7v7 (or maybe even something else).

Grade 7/8 Group

Our Grade 7/8 Boys and Girls teams have been registered to participate in MAYS just as they would during a normal season. MAYS will be following all of the Mass Youth Soccer guidelines including rules modifications and spectator requirements. Other items to note:

- First games for the season are planned for 9/12.
- The Sterling teams will be playing teams from elsewhere within the MAYS region which may include the usual travel distances (60+ min drive times possible). The schedule has not been created yet, so we can’t speculate about which teams will be on the schedule.
- “In-town” wasn’t really an option for this group since the total number of players is much less. Additionally, we feel that older players are much more capable of following the rules and therefore present a lower risk.
- With the number of players, we were only going to be able to support a single team for both boys and girls and therefore the last-minute nature of all the changes didn’t impact our ability to form a team per the MAYS deadlines.

High School Age Group

The Wachusett towns agreed earlier in the year to create a new program designed specifically for the high school players focused on recreation and enjoyment of the game. This program is being managed primarily through Holden Youth Soccer and therefore any changes will be determined by that program.

Wow, just wow. That’s a lot of information.

I know. You can imagine how much time, thought, consideration, deliberation and compromise went into creating this plan. This was a delicate balance between what we want (everyone to play soccer) with some other important requirements (everyone must be safe) along with reality (we have to be able to actually execute it). In the end, I think this is a great option for many players while unfortunately ending the season for others.



What happens if the rules change again?

We will adapt and we will continue to follow the guidance of the State and Mass Youth Soccer. In the end, we will continue to provide a safe, soccer experience to as many kids as we can.

What happens if there is a Covid case?

We are in the process of developing our Covid policy to help guide us in the event that something occurs. Rest assured that we will be keeping the safety of our players, coaches, and community at the forefront of our planning while following the guidance from infectious disease experts.

I want my child to play, but I don't like the rules and/or requirements...

We are simply the messenger. We didn't make up the rules and requirements, but we have to enforce them for the entire organization. If you are not willing to follow ALL the rules and requirements (including all mask and spectator requirements), please follow the opt-out guidance below.

What do I do now? (PreK - Grade 1 Edition) (ACTION REQUIRED)

We need to collect some information for the refund process. We have created a Google Form to get the necessary information ([click here](#)). You should find it quick, simple, and painless. Due to the number of refunds being issued, please allow several weeks for us to process your request.

What do I do now? (Grade 2 – Grade 8 Edition) (ACTION REQUIRED)

We need to know from EVERYONE about your plans for the season since we know this isn't what you originally expected. We have created a Google Form to get the necessary information ([click here](#)). You should find it quick, simple, and painless and it will need to be completed for every player you registered. If you want to opt-out of the season, you MUST opt-out before 9/1. If you want to play, after you submit the Google Form you will receive a separate email to electronically sign an updated liability waiver that was created by Mass Youth Soccer for all member organizations to use for the season. This is required and you won't be able to play without it.

If you have a Grade 7/8 player and you are planning to opt-out, please let us know as soon as possible. Both teams are currently full and there are other players interested in registering.

I need a refund. What are the refund options?

- Roll over your registration fee to 2021 season.
 - If you choose this option and your situation changes in 2021, we can still issue your 2020 refund next year.
- Request a 95% refund.
 - If possible, we would appreciate a 5% donation to help cover administrative costs.
 - When you pay by credit card, ~5% of your payment goes to transaction fees and doesn't make it to SYSA. For example, for every \$90 registration we receive \$84.75.
 - We can refund by check, PayPal or Venmo.
- Donate your registration fee as a SYSA Hardship Sponsor.
 - We created a special Hardship Sponsor level as part of our sponsorship program this year. This is a special pool of money to support families who are in need of monetary assistance to play soccer. Soccer is a tremendous sport and community activity that should be available to everyone, regardless of their ability to pay.
- Request a full refund.
 - We can refund by check, PayPal or Venmo



Are you accepting new registrations?

Yes. Registration is now reopened for Grade 2 through Grade 6 for residents of Sterling, West Boylston, and Princeton. The Grade 7/8 teams are both full and any registration requests will be directed to the coaches for those teams. **Registrations will close for good on 9/1.** No additional registrations at any level will be accepted after that date. No exceptions.

Are we seriously on page 6???

Yup. I've achieved a new personal best (or worst, depending on your perspective).

I skipped to the end...did I miss anything?

(facepalm)

It's impossible to understate the dedication and support of the entire Sterling Youth Soccer Board to get to this point and they've all committed to launch this season. This is a very special group of people who will be working tirelessly over the next several months to bring you "2020 Pandemic Soccer". It may not necessarily be exactly what you expected, but it may just be what we all need.

As always, please reach out with any questions.

Brent Powers

President, Sterling Youth Soccer

