

New soccer group launches in fall

Inland Empire Youth Soccer Association formed

By Pia Hallenberg, piah@spokesman.com The Spokesman-Review

The five Spokane city soccer clubs – Shadow, Breakers, Sabers, Scotties and Storm FC – have announced the formation of a new soccer association in Spokane: the Inland Empire Youth Soccer Association.

Washington Youth Soccer, the state association that oversees and sanctions youth soccer in the Spokane area, asked the clubs to pursue a merger with Spokane Valley Junior Soccer Association to create one soccer organization in Spokane.

The negotiations stalled because the clubs couldn't agree on how to create a board and bylaws that would allow all clubs equal representation, regardless of the geographical location. The five city clubs chose instead to form the Inland Empire Youth Soccer Association with the blessing of the state association.

"For the kids who play in any of these clubs right now, it will not mean anything," said Jim Wilson, general manager of the Shadow soccer club and a Spokane Youth Sports Association board member.

"In fall, when the new association goes live, its primary objective is to establish and maintain a working relationship with SYSA so we don't have a fight over the kids." Wilson has been working with representatives from the five city clubs to facilitate the formation of the Inland Empire Youth Soccer Association, which he expects to be approved at a state association meeting on March 20.

"We don't expect there to be any trouble," Wilson said. "For the five clubs this new association is a good thing. It cements the unification we began putting into place last year."

The five city clubs were registered with WYS through Spokane Youth Sports Association's soccer group, SYSA-S.

Last year, SYSA sued the state association alleging it conspired to conduct a hostile takeover of SYSA's soccer program. The disagreement between SYSA and the state association began when SYSA-S changed its bylaws to become more independent without notifying SYSA's board.

Since Spokane Valley Junior Soccer Association was in good standing with Washington Youth Soccer, that association was asked to pursue a merger of all clubs in Spokane, and for a while it looked like it was going to work out – but negotiations ultimately broke down.

The city clubs then approached the state association asking for one last chance to get organized and keep their organization separate from the Spokane Valley group.

"It was the five presidents of the old SYSA-S clubs that made the decision to form the new association," said Phil Helean, executive director of SYSA. "We'd like to continue to work with them like we've done for the last more than 30 years."

Chris Sande, president of Spokane Valley Junior Soccer Association, said it's time to move on.

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"We hope the time has come to wipe the slate clean in order to build trust and improve soccer opportunities countywide," Sande wrote in an e-mail. "If the new association serves the developmental needs of young soccer players, then we look forward to working with them in the future."

Terry Fisher, CEO of the Federal Way-based WYS declined to comment on what's going on in Spokane.

Wilson said he is hopeful SYSA will agree to license its soccer operations to the Inland Empire Youth Soccer Association. That reorganization, Wilson explained, would result in money that is collected from soccer player fees, memberships and tournaments remaining with the soccer programs.

In 2009, more than 10,000 youths played different sports through SYSA – the soccer club dispute affects the 1,600 who play competitive soccer on the select and premier level.

"We have just over 4,000 kids in recreational soccer this spring," said Helean. "The majority of the kids just want to go out and play soccer and have fun."

Starting this summer, field rentals at the Dwight Merkel Sports Complex will be handled by the city of Spokane's Parks and Recreation Department, while SYSA will continue to manage and maintain the South Complex, the Mead Sports Complex and Andrew Rypien Field. The latter is the only field SYSA owns.

"We are expecting a smooth transition all together," Wilson said.