

Utah Area Sports

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PLAYING BY THE RULES – an Interview with Chris Mecham Men’s Sport Specialist

Sports are governed by rules, and good sportsmanship can only be achieved when both players and officials are fully informed of the rules and how they are to be applied. Our recommendation is that the same set of rules be used within all stakes and coordinating councils in Utah. Based on years of experience we believe the following are best for Church play:

- SOFTBALL: American Softball Association
- BASKETBALL: Utah High School Athletic Association
- VOLLEYBALL: USA Volleyball Association (but without a Libero player; a defensive specialist that plays on the back row)

These rulebooks can be obtained online at each of the association websites. In the past, the Area could mandate these rules for all regional and area tournaments—now it’s up to the Coordinating Councils and local priesthood leaders to choose. But in our role as advisors to the program, we strongly encourage their continued use at all levels without modification. To find out why, we interviewed Chris Mecham, one of two Men’s Directors in the Utah Salt Lake City Area. Chris suggests five primary reasons:

1. **Safety of the individual.** Church Sports started in 1908, so there’s now over 100 years experience. The “truth” part of Church Sports is that it gives people a chance for physical activity and fellowship—that doesn’t change with time. But the way the game is played, the “mechanics”, evolves. The rules mentioned are those that have stood the test of time in making the games both fun and safe for amateurs.
2. **Prevent damage to buildings.** Buildings are expensive and the Church needs assurance that play is controlled. Adhering to well-defined rules helps. For example, there was concern when we wanted to introduce indoor soccer (futsal). If you didn’t know anything about it, you could easily picture soccer balls being ricocheted off walls that on the weekend are intended to host a wedding reception. But, after we showed them the official rules of the game, the general church leaders gave us permission to proceed. Another example is dodgeball. If we use Nerf balls the Church is okay using them in the cultural hall.
3. **Consistency between local and multi-stake play.** It’s frustrating to a ward team that plays by one set of rules in stake competition to go into a Coordinating Council tournament that has a different set of rules. Because there is confusion, tempers flare and players sometimes think the officials are picking on them. This isn’t hypothetical—we’ve experienced it. Consider basketball where there are four different sanctioning bodies. Suppose each stake decides to use a different rulebook. When they meet in a tournament everyone has to start at ground zero, and it’s almost certain to cause frustration.

4. **Repetition leads to excellence.** It takes repetition for people to gain mastery in anything they do. Repetition makes something that was hard in the beginning easy in time because it becomes ingrained. This is also true of the rules – if players learn one set of rules they adapt their play accordingly and adherence becomes second nature to them. Change the rules midstream and all that hard work is frustrated and they are at a disadvantage.
5. **Informal Rules Trumped by Officials.** In my experience in sports I find that in casual play my friends and I tend to develop our own informal set of rules. For example, you might push a little just out of fun and to tease with people in your own ward or neighboring wards that you know well. And its okay because you are friends. But the officials don’t know those “rules” and will call fouls where we might let it pass. Once again, we’ve created a disadvantage for ourselves by not following a consistent set of rules.”

When asked why people are tempted to deviate from the rules Chris replied, “I think it’s from an interesting combination of both understanding and lack of understanding. What I mean by that is that most of us understand the NBA rules because we watch the *Jazz* and other teams regularly. What most people don’t know is that the NBA rules were developed for entertainment value to keep a game between superbly skilled athletes moving. Those same rules are not appropriate for amateurs. In my opinion, the Utah High School Athletic Association rules are closest to the pure form of basketball, which is why they have been the traditional choice for Church Sports.”

Another example Chris cited comes from the Activities Handbook where it emphasizes that the purpose of Church Sports is to involve all players. “I watched one game where one team played the same six players for a set of three games—and they won because they played only their best players. They beat out a team with 14 players who played equal time for all players. In my mind it was the second team who had the better grasp of the purpose of Church Sports. That’s why it’s important to study the Utah Area Sports Handbook for guidance. I personally hope that all the stakes and Coordinating Councils will continue to rely on the rule books mentioned above.

Finally, one concern we’ve had raised is why high school athletes can’t play Church Sports when the school season ends. “The easy answer—because that’s what the Church Activities Handbook says, and it ought to be binding. The other answer is also important—because the player can disqualify not just himself, but his entire high school team if he does—that’s in the rules the high schools obligate themselves to.”

COORDINATING COUNCILS TAKE CONTROL

It’s been a year since the Brethren changed responsibility for Church Sports from the Area-Region model to local priesthood leaders in Stakes and Coordinating Councils. Church Sports now falls firmly under the direction of the Stake President and his Stake Sports Specialist on the High Council, and the Bishop and Ward Sports Specialist. Let’s take a few moments to review the program and how it’s working.

Question: From a priesthood leadership point-of-view how is the program different than before?

- This was a significant change. The old program was managed by the Area Men's and Women's Sports Directors, with the help of Regional Directors and Specialists. These individuals organized and directed regional tournaments for member stakes as well as providing training to officials and coaches. While we always sought to involve stake presidents and bishops, they did not bear direct responsibility for the program and participation throughout the three Areas in Utah was uneven, with some stakes actively involved, others not so much.
- Now the Church Sports program is a priesthood responsibility in each stake and ward. The same leader who supervises the quorums and auxiliaries of the Church now oversees the Church Sports program, which means it is more easily integrated into the ward and stake calendar, and has proper guidance from those whom we sustain as leaders. Each stake is free to select the sports they want to emphasize, guidelines for sportsmanship, as well as calling officials and coaches. With a much greater "stake" in the program, priesthood leaders are stepping up and providing outstanding leadership.

Question: What exactly is a Coordinating Council?

- Each stake president in Utah is a member of a local Coordinating Council that includes from six to twenty-five stakes in a geographical area. These Councils meet quarterly to discuss common concerns and to set policy for issues that cross stake boundaries. Individual members of the Council assume responsibility as an Agent Stake President for various responsibilities, such as Welfare, Missionary, Sports, etc. We're pleased that every Council in Utah has selected an Agent Stake President for Church Sports. The primary responsibility of the Coordinating Council is to set guidelines for Church Sports in their boundaries, with input from all stake presidents. The Coordinating Councils organize multi-stake tournaments, provide training for officials, coaches, and players, and assists individual stakes and wards as requested.

How does a busy stake president find time to supervise Church Sports in addition to everything else he is doing?

- Fortunately, the stake president doesn't have to do it alone. The program encourages each stake to call a Stake Sports Specialist who acts under the direction of the stake president in implementing the program in the stake and wards. At the Coordinating Council level, the Agent Stake President is assisted by his Sports Specialist, who, in addition to the work he does in his own stake, also organizes Council level meetings with other Stake Sports Specialists to actually organize tournaments and fulfill their other responsibilities.

What is the role of Area Directors and Specialists since direct authority no longer resides at that level?

- Each of the three Areas in Utah (Utah North, Utah Salt Lake City, and Utah South) each have a Men's and Women's Director who is assisted by various assistant directors and

individual sports specialists. Our role is to help the Council and Stake Sports Specialists by providing encouragement and support in training officials and coaches, as well as helping organize tournaments as requested. It's now an advisory role where we help by invitation.

- *Example:* We have Sports Specialists for volleyball, basketball, futsal (indoor soccer), softball, and golf. We also have Young Adult Directors who work directly with the young adults. One of the greatest services offered is the training of officials under the direction of the Area Officials Directors and their very capable assistants. These dedicated individuals provide an extensive training program to help Church Sports live up to its potential in promoting fellowship among the Saints, less active members, and friends of other faiths. Check the calendar for scheduled training.

How is the new program working in the real world?

- As you can imagine there was some trepidation when the new program was announced since it's hard to let go of centralized authority. But the inspiration of the program is unmistakable—it's a truism that virtually all activities at the stake and ward level should be under the direction of the stake president and bishop if they are to succeed.
- And now, under the direction of priesthood leaders, Church Sports is succeeding as never before. At a recent Area Coordinating meeting the sports specialists and directors were asked how they feel the new program is working. **The unanimous opinion was that the new program is far more responsive to the needs of members because of local priesthood leadership.** We're pleased at how many Coordinating Council and Stake Sports Specialists have stepped up to the plate and really gone to work making the program viable in their stake and council area. In the long run this is the best thing that could ever have happened to Church Sports.

Whom do I contact if I have questions or concerns?

- Your Coordinating Council or Stake Sports Specialist, of course. He is the one who has been called and set apart to support you in your church unit. These Sports Specialists can call Area specialists and directors in the entire state of Utah as needed. The talent and commitment of the specialists and directors is amazing. They are anxious to provide the training and help that is needed for Church Sports to play an active role in helping members to maintain physical health, as well as offering great fellowship opportunities. All in all it's been a great year—and we're just getting started!

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