

Grade 9 ban from varsity soccer reverses for next season



Varsity boys soccer player Sam Singer ('23) tackles an opposing player for the ball while playing ACS Hillingdon Oct. 17. Grade 9 students were not allowed onto varsity soccer teams this season due to U.K. Football Association guidelines. *Photo by Clara Martinez*

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Lead Culture Editor

Soccer athletes under the age of 15, primarily Grade 9 students, were unable to be a part of varsity soccer teams this season in accordance with the U.K.'s Football Association guidelines on age banding.

Rishi Kurada ('23), one of the varsity boys soccer captains, said he was disappointed when his coaches informed him there would be no freshmen on the team this season.

"I think it's quite a shame because every freshman when they come into high school, they want to make the best team possible and it ruins a bit of motivation for them," Kurada said.

Director of Athletics John Farmer said the school received an exemption of the restriction from the FA three weeks after tryouts concluded, so upcoming seasons are not currently expected to have the age cutoff.

The FA Handbook states "a player under the age of 15 as at midnight on 31st August in the playing season" may not compete with teammates two or more years older or younger because of physical differences in size and strength.

Farmer said the school's extensive safeguard-

ing training for coaches allowed varsity soccer teams to have a "pass" on the age guidelines three weeks after tryouts, and it was too late to change the rosters for the current season.

Despite receiving an exemption from the FA, Farmer said the regulations that prevent athletes playing with students two years younger or older than them are twofold, regarding safety both on and off the field.

"It isn't just about people being on the field, it's about the fact that there are locker room and changing room considerations there as well," Farmer said.

As a leader to the team, Kurada said he would have liked to be a role model to athletes new to high school and unite all four grade levels.

"Soccer is like one way for me to interact with other grades, and I feel like now it's kind of shutting off the connections between the seniors and the freshmen," Kurada said. "It's just kind of sad for us. We don't get to know the youngest in high school and the youngest don't get to know the oldest."

On the other hand, Grade 9 JV soccer player Luseni Conteh ('26) said he doesn't mind that freshmen are unable to be a part of the varsity team because it incentivizes younger players to work toward a higher achievement.

"It allows you to go up the ranks and get a feel for the game in the different ranks," Conteh said.

While Farmer said it is beneficial for Grade 9 students to play on JV to strive toward a goal, he also said Grade 9 students can also be pushed to improve through playing with seniors on the same varsity team.

"It's great from the standpoint that it gives those students something to shoot for," Farmer said.

Farmer also said allowing for younger students to compete on varsity all four years allows for a "team culture" that provides continuity in traditions that are passed "generation to generation."

In addition, first-year varsity soccer player Nicholas Farinola ('24) said limiting the inclusion of younger students could potentially hinder the team's success because more skilled players might only be eligible for JV.

"If someone is good enough for the team, regardless of their age, they should have the opportunity to play and compete," Farinola said. "By excluding freshmen, this might set the precedent that not all the best players are on the team."

Concerning the varsity girls soccer team, athlete Lulu Hogan ('25) said she is apprehensive about replacing the 11 graduating athletes next year, as many newcomers will have never played

in a major tournament before.

"The biggest grade on our team right now are seniors so they're all leaving next year, which means we won't have a full team and we're going to need incoming freshmen on the team," Hogan said.

Conteh said there is an element of the ban being reversed for next season that seems "unfair" to current Grade 9 students who have worked hard and were unable to have the same opportunity.

In contrast, after playing for the varsity team as a freshman, Hogan said freshmen should have the opportunity to be able to compete in varsity matches and tournaments like ISSTs.

"You build these relationships with your team, and it sort of is all built up to the big competition of the season," Hogan said.

While there have been five injuries on the girls varsity soccer team this season, Hogan said they were not caused from contact. Farinola, who sprained his ankle after being tackled, said his injury as an upperclassman suggests that risk from contact sports does not correlate with the age of the player.

"It could happen to anyone," Farinola said. "It's just, I guess, part of the game."

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