

Youth Soccer reporting adverse mental health impacts due to shutdown

By **Robert Belardi**

If the government can be the benefactor and the saviour for many local clubs itching to play they should know it's far beyond sport. At this point, it is about justifying the health of all young athletes. It's about understanding that physical health is not only of the utmost importance. Mental health is not far away either.

In response to the COVID-19 lockdowns, a WhatsApp group with 17 youth soccer clubs was comprised.

Initially designed to discuss the sharing of resources, Executive Director of FC Durham Academy Elizabeth McCaw addressed another important topic of the group.

"The government isn't really asking our athletes what's happening to them," McCaw stated.

"The school lockdowns and the lack of structure, social connections and routine is how we build our programs. So, when we took that away from our athletes, the question just came up."

Riding into Mental Health week with CamH (May 3-9), McCaw wanted to share the voice of our athletes. Almost instantly, all groups agreed to comply and two questions were sent out to over 30,000 athletes.

"We got 3,500 [responses] within a five-, six-day period. It showed us instantly how bad the problem is. It was difficult to hear our kids speaking to us and our families."

In the absence of physical joy and outdoor fun on to the soccer pitch, the first question was, "Over the last year of navigating the pandemic, has your player's mental health been affected in any of the following ways? (Anxiety, Worry, Depression, Lack of Structure, Loss of Social Connection, Loss of Routine, Stress, other)."

The second question asked, "What would your player say is the thing they miss most about participating with their club/academy team in a regular in-person environment?"

After scrounging through the numbers and organizing the responses, the data was troubling.

According to their numbers, 86 per cent lack social connection, 82 per cent loss of routine, 67 per cent lack structure, 2 in 5 identified experiencing anxiety, stress and worry, 1 in 5 noted depression, 40 per cent referenced exercise and lack of physical activity as the thing they miss the most, and 32 per cent miss their teammates and friends."

Since the beginning of this recent lockdown, soccer clubs were gearing up for a return to the pitch and the hope was to get back to playing competitive matches. According to the survey, most players were a part of competitive teams. And now there is a risk of not even being able to get back to soccer as we knew it anytime soon.

"I know I can say this on behalf of every club. We have sat back and sat back. We've believed in our government with confidence they'll take us through this and they have failed us," said President of Whitecaps London and match referee Abbi Lezizidis.

An article released by CBC's Muriel Draaisma written on April 14, said that Toronto's SickKids ER visits have grown by 25 per cent for children thinking about suicide. McCaw had heard that SickKids was up by 12 per cent in youth mental health visits in general from professor and holder of the Canada Research Chair in School-Based Mental health and Violence Prevention Tracy Vaillancourt via email.

These alarming numbers have many parents with younger children and teenagers worried.

?There's another pandemic that's going to come as a result of COVID. If the government doesn't pay attention at the health table to say as we're dealing with one crisis, we're creating another, that's where we want to sit in the space,? McCaw said.

What this exposed for all clubs is to generate a document of resources to help parents with children experiencing these adverse mental affects, reminding them of what options their children have to continue to get better.

What began as an advocacy campaign has now turned into a movement.

?What is important to note is we're not talking about soccer only, we're talking about youth sports,? Lezizidis said.

?Basketball was approved to play outside last summer yet soccer wasn't approved. We couldn't touch the ball with our hands. We're looking for consistency. Some common sense here.?

Lezizidis touched on multiple studies that proved transmission of any illness outdoors in the summer time is minimal. He also runs a men's soccer league in London and says seven different health units will dictate whether or not he will be able to play this season.

Both McCaw and Lezizidis plan to send a candid and open email to Premier Doug Ford, with the hopes of an Interview Opportunity to discuss what COVID-19 health measures are doing to children.