

The Newmarket Minor Softball Association (The Stingers) is a not-for-profit organization run entirely by volunteers and has a proud history celebrating 45 years of organizing houseleague level softball programming to the residents of Newmarket, Ontario and surrounding area communities. We support over 300 player members of all ages & genders and skill level. From the beginning of May to the end of August we deliver four evenings a week of game scheduling, facilities, communications, league administration and officiating. Over 40 volunteers, contribute each year and give back to their community by reinvesting personal time & expertise to deliver safe, fun, healthy, active, organized and affordable sport programming and play environment. <https://nmsa.net/> We support and market our softball programming to the entire Newmarket community of over 90,000 residents plus the surrounding Towns of Aurora, Stouffville and Richmond Hill.

We believe we are an organization that can be used as a viable model, and one who shares the same pillars of focus as the key areas of M-206 (A Motion to Study Fitness and Physical Activity Levels of Canadian Youth) namely: (a) strategies to increase the level of fitness and physical activity for youth; (b) the economic, social, cultural, and physical and mental health benefits associated with increased fitness and physical activity among youth; (c) the impact of increased fitness and physical activity in relation to anti-bullying.

With increased support at all levels of government; Municipal, Provincial and Federal, we believe our Volunteer-run Sports Organization (VRSO) model can be replicated across Canada and across all types of sports programming. Our 4 year strategic plan is built upon 4 pillars of focus; Enhanced Participation, Enhanced Excellence, Enhanced Capacity and Enhanced Interaction. https://nmsa.net/Public/Documents/NMSA_Strat_Plan_2019-22_Final_2019.pdf

League Information

History:

The Stingers have operated as a volunteer run organization since its founding in 1974. The league continued to grow and reached a peak membership of over 1600 players in the mid 1980's. By the mid 1990's, the League operated programming for over 60 teams with a membership near 900. It is important to note the population of Newmarket, Ontario at this time was around 40,000 residents. Today, Newmarket has over 90,000 residents. During this peak period of membership, each team had the funding support of an area business or organization. Therefore, there were over 60 team sponsors. During this period, the Town of Newmarket did not require permit fees for the use of diamonds in and around Newmarket. Today, fees paid to the Town are just over \$24.00 per hour, 5 hours per day, 4 days per week. During the peak membership periods there multiple female and male teams playing in all age divisions. In that era, the League was also able to develop a full Select and Rep level of softball programming in most age divisions. In fact, Newmarket teams went on to win multiple Regional, Provincial and National championships.

Participation: Our Volunteer-run Sports Organization (VRSO) delivers seasonal softball programming to over 300 players. The playing season runs from the beginning of May to the end of August annually, weather-dependending. Over 700 hours of softball programming is organized, scheduled and managed by the League. Divisions include: Timbits (Learn to Play), 5 Pitch, U10 Mite, U12 Squirt, U14 Novice, U16 Bantam and U19 Midget. The League also runs an adult (30+) 3 pitch division. Other than the Timbits and 5 Pitch divisions, all divisions are female only. This is not a league initiative, but rather an ongoing social shift that sees parents moving their boys into “Hardball/Baseball” starting at age 10. This is shift started to occur about 12 years ago. The League operates with a volunteer

Executive team of roughly 12 adults who are voted into various roles annually. In addition, the League also enjoys the support of over 40 volunteer coaches, assistant coaches, team managers, event help and other general volunteers. In total, the League volunteers give over 4200 hours of personal time to help manage, govern and organize all League activities. The League also supports the training and scheduling of roughly 25 umpire officials who are all between the ages of 12 and 20. Umpires are paid by the League to officiate all League games.

Funding: Currently, our VRSO is entirely funded by membership fees, local business sponsors and once through a grant from the Trillium Fund of Ontario. Total revenues are approximately \$40,000 annually. 70% of funding comes from player membership fees. Key expenses for the league include: Municipal permit fees, uniform costs, equipment purchases, insurance and umpire fees. 38% of funding (or close to \$16,000) goes towards paying Municipal permit fees, 23% towards player uniforms, 18% pays for umpires and officiating, 10% pays to replace old equipment, 5% covers medals, awards and trophies and 3% pays for league insurance.

Advertising and Communications: The Stingers organization is solely responsible for all advertising costs, costs and resources to increase awareness and resources to increase community connections. Primary communications are done through social media and website (www.nmsa.net, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram). The league also communicates to its entire membership through email campaigns and updates. Preseason communications to raise awareness and increase membership are accomplished primarily through volunteer one-on-one contact with local businesses and organizations, Chamber of Commerce home show, Town of Newmarket registration event and other area events where the league can gain exposure. The league is required to pay regular rates on all trade shows, publications, Chamber of Commerce publications, and Municipal Recreation Guides. In-season advertising is done through word of mouth, social media and community networking that is also supported by our league sponsors.

We believe innovative ideas are the key to promote, communicate and increase League awareness. We are the first Community Houseleague Softball organization (possibly sports organization) to create and publish a 4 year strategic plan. It is available for everyone to view on our website. Meeting face to face with community partners is encouraged and is at the core of our "connected community" strategy. More importantly, we are rethinking the role of community based sports programming. How do we better use the space. How do sponsors better connect with the league so there is a benefit to all. How can we cross promote with other community organizations like the Legion, Veterans Club, Optimist Club, Rotary, Rose of Sharon, Pride, Food Bank etc. to align goals and resources so that everyone benefits from a connection to kids playing sports. We are rethinking the space in and around the diamonds to create a place where our community wants to congregate, laugh, have fun, grow together and live together.

Training and Development: In late 2018, The Stingers applied for a grant from the Ontario Trillium Fund. The grant outline: The need is to improve training of our league coaches and officials. The League's annual budget does not cover costs and resources for each team's coach to receive even basic accredited training. As a league, we also recognize "participants with an untrained coach have an attrition rate of 26% compared to 5% for children coached by trained individuals." A grant will help fund training our coaches, who in turn will provide better programming & resources and grow our player numbers to over 360 in the next 2 years. We want to promote our league as offering the best houseleague coaching in the region and engage more children into the sport of softball from ages 5 to 18. We are targeting female players to provide them with an inclusive, safe environment, active lifestyle and ability to learn coaching skills. We want to live up to the expectations of the community-based sport potential in the Newmarket community. Coaching Clinics will include; Learn to Coach,

Community Softball Coach, Drills Drills Drills and CanPitch. Accredited Clinics are administered by Softball Ontario and/or Softball Canada. We will track training progress, attrition rates and number of female players/coaches who receive accredited training.

Key Challenges for the League and risks for declining membership:

1. **Time.** Due to time limitations of families where both parents work, there is increased risk for parents to commit the time and resources needed to enrol their child into team sports.
2. **Awareness:** Families are often challenged to easily access information about ALL the sports programming options available in the area they live . Volunteer run organizations are left to their own devices to create awareness about what their individual League offers.
3. **Community Awareness:** Gone are the days where community sports leagues were covered in local print and online media. Scores, player and team stories, accomplishments, tournaments and the support of regular season and playoff games are not promoted or covered by area media outlets. This has resulted in a major decline of the community coming out to support and cheer on youth games and sports.
4. **Education Curriculum:** We have seen a steady decline of extra-curricular sports programming at all grade levels from Kindergarten to grade 12. It has been shared that this is due to declining funding and teacher/administrator availability. We believe that children who have exposure to team sports and increased sports programming will go on to seek out similar activities outside of school and form healthy lifestyle behaviours that last a lifetime.
5. **Facilities:** Our league and sport is continued to be challenged by the decline in field and ball diamond facilities. Despite the population growth in and around Newmarket, the number of viable, safe facilities has decreased. Therefore on a per capita basis, the availability has dropped dramatically. We believe a better model is to take a Regional view of facilities and coordinate VRSO programming across municipal boundary lines. If strategies to increase physical activity are viewed at the National level, then municipal boundary lines should be virtually invisible.
6. **Costs:** For the most part, we have found that families who have the time available and funds to support youth playing sports are OK with small fee increases over time. However, we have identified a large group of children who don't have the financial support to join our League even if they can commit to the time. We believe we can increase youth participation in our League between 10 and 20% by securing funds to help cover membership costs. In 2019, we began a bursary program where area businesses and organizations have made a financial commitment to cover the membership costs for children who can't otherwise afford to play. This year, we are very proud to have signed up 8 children who will be playing softball for the very first time.

Forward thinking Thought Leadership

A better information model should be pursued so that children and parents have better access and increased awareness to join and connect with volunteer-run sports organizations (VRSOs) across Canada. In most jurisdictions, VRSOs operate on their own, disconnected from Municipal, Provincial and National programs. VRSOs usually operate as silo organizations who are not well-connected with similar organizations within their region, nor other sport organizations who operate with a similar model nor are they connected with similar Municipal run Recreation Programs.

More study is needed to fully capture, document and understand the full range of sports and activity programs that are not offered by Municipalities and other funded programs. With a proper study, a more complete understanding of the following could be gained:

1. The membership numbers by sport, by region

2. Membership costs to play/engage with sport or activity
3. Time commitments for members to play/engage with sport or activity
4. League/organization costs to run/operate
5. Detailed Quantitative economic impact to community
6. Detailed sociological and health benefits to membership and community
7. What sports/activities are not municipally/provincially/nationally run
8. What facilities are required to support the sport/activity to operate
9. How do current education systems and school board programming support sport and activities within and outside of school hours. What changes have occurred in school sports over time and what affect is this having on children's lifestyle and healthy living habits.
10. Are children who compete in VRSOs and gain skills in team sports, coaching and officiating properly recognized by their communities as having desirable skills to be hired into workforce?
11. Which sports/activities maximize land use, park lands, existing facilities on a per member or per hour of use perspective?
12. What other community and healthy living activities can be tied into, run in conjunction with and associated with the operations of exiting VRSOs?

There is an opportunity to enable a centralized online platform where parents and children can access, learn about, connect with and register with ALL sports programming within a given geographical zone. A good example of how an opportunity like this could be effective is a scenario where a family is planning to move to a new neighbourhood and they wish to connect with their new community and there is interest to have their children become active through sports. If there was a centralized online platform, those parents could look up and learn about ALL the sports programming offered and available in their new community. They could find out which days leagues operate, the costs, the seasonality of the program, contact information and general information about the league and commitment level.

Currently, no model like this exists. Interested parents are required to access each separate Municipal site to learn what sports and recreation programs the local municipality offers. This is often found in an online version of the Town's recreation guide. Most recreation guides do not include information about all the other sports and activity organizations that are not run/operated by that specific Town. Only if a VRSO spends money to advertise in a Town Recreation Guide is there a chance that residents will learn about what are ALL the sports opportunities available to their families. They would then have to "Google" search by sport and by league to scour and identify each separate association's sports/activity/recreation offering. If it is a volunteer-driven organization (a VRSO), then online information is only as good as the money and resources each separate league has spent to advertise and maintain their online presence and drive awareness to the programming they offer. All of this also requires money and expertise resources for online access and proper internet infrastructure.

VRSOs like the NMSA, will often use the framework of a provincial or national program with respect to rules, regulations, officiating and guidelines. There are numerous sources of data, including Ontario's Trillium Fund that shows that organizations who have well trained coaches, volunteers and officials will retain player members year to year and minimize attrition rates. However, the challenge for most Volunteer run organizations is to provide funding, time availability and resources to provide training to new coaches/volunteers/officials and to provide ongoing training for existing coaches/volunteers/officials.

Summary of the Newmarket Minor Softball Association's 4 year Strategic Plan:

Vision:

Developing leadership, teamwork and a continued life-long, healthy & active participation of the game of softball in a safe, fair, inclusive, age & ability appropriate competitive environment.

Mission:

Newmarket Minor Softball Association promotes, engages and enhances our sport by developing and delivering innovative and diverse programs and services for all players, coaches and families within & surrounding the Newmarket community.

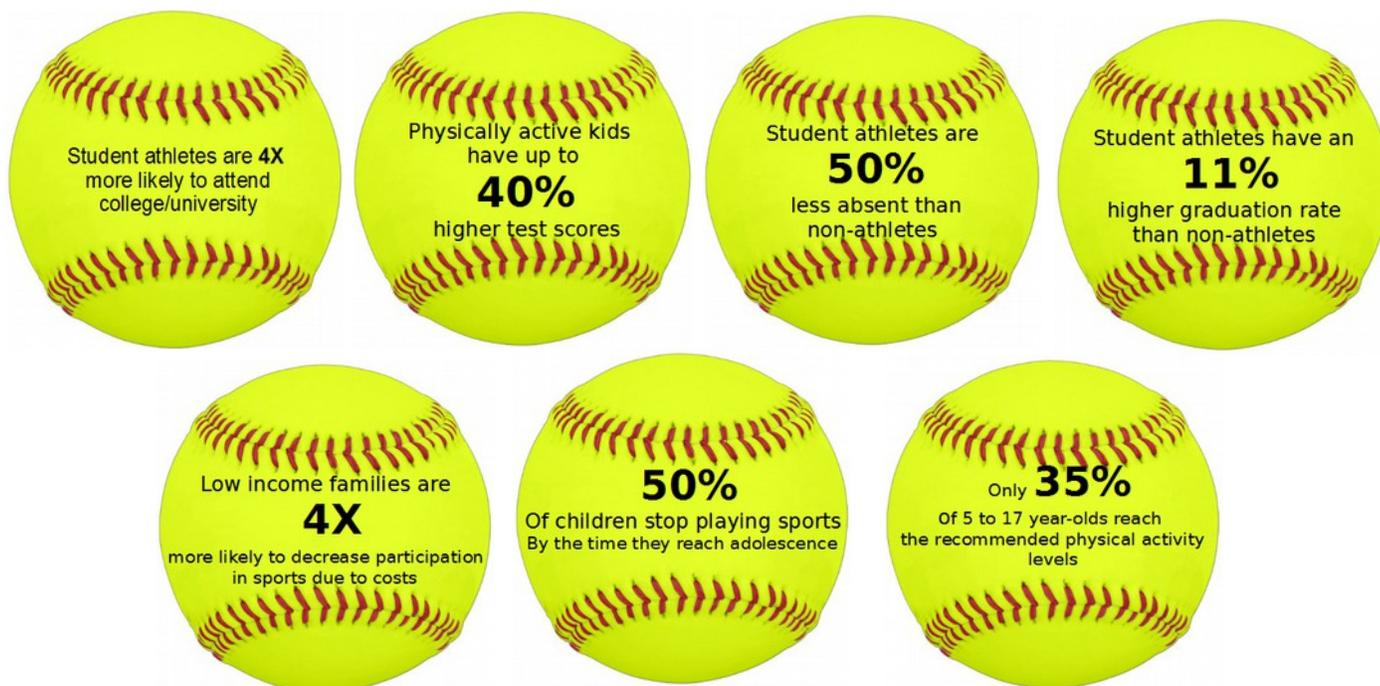
Operating Principles:

1. Develop, promote and deliver sustainable programs to meet participant's needs.
2. Encourage participation at all levels, abilities and all ages with a particular emphasis in the growth of female players, trained & certified coaches, officials and volunteers.
3. Recognition and Respect for all.
4. Effective communications.
5. Effective organizational and financial management.
6. Long Term Player Development (LTPD)* Framework guides decision making.

Values:

- Fair and inclusive.
- Ethical, respectful and moral behaviour.
- Fun, Safe and supportive environment

Statistical information used by the League to promote the benefits of youth playing sports and the benefits of the Sport of Softball.



Data Sources: <https://www.sportsmatter.org/>
<https://otf.ca/>