

Eligibility for Church Sports

Stake presidents have direct responsibility for church sports in their stakes, assisted by an organization established by the Church to assure uniformity and fair play. Elder Sam Clark of the Fifth Quorum of the Seventy presides over church sports, including the 108 people who sit on Utah's 18 Church Sports Coordinating Councils. The rules for eligibility to play church sports have been set by the Utah Area Sports program, of which the Orem Lakeview Stake is a part.

As a participant in stake youth sports, you are a part of something quite big, quite special, and quite different from other sports programs you may be familiar with which are organized by schools and communities.

"Sports activities in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have a unique central purpose... a purpose much higher than the development of physical prowess, *or even victory itself*," (-The First Presidency, emphasis added).

The Utah Area Sports website states:

The goal of the Utah Area Sports program is to 'bring souls to Christ' through the unparalleled fellowship activities that sports provides to both members and friends of other faiths.

Area directors and their committees have been called to assist in the development of well-organized programs in stakes and wards, well-trained coaches and officials; and a commitment to good sportsmanship on the part of participants and spectators.

In short, Church sports is much more about fellowshiping and developing character than about winning games or championships.

Simply put, youth sports is a program where the young men and young women of a ward's youth program, who are not competing in that particular sport at school, can form a team and play together.

The rules for eligibility encourage youth to fellowship together within the bounds of fair play. After all, "The primary purpose of Church sports is to assist families, quorums and auxiliaries in meeting the mission of the church, which is to 'invite all to come unto Christ' (D&C 20:59) and 'be perfected in Him.' (Moroni 10:32)" (utahareasports.org).

Age Requirements

"Players should play with the age group and class that they affiliate with during church attendance." (Utah Area Stake Sports Specialist Frequently Asked Questions document).

"The age groupings of the Aaronic Priesthood (Deacons, Teachers, Priests) and Young Women

(Beehives, MiaMaid, Laurels) for sports participation are generally appropriate. In units where youths are few in number, combining quorum or class members to make a team is recommended. When combining youth to form a team, leaders should consider each participant's age, maturity, and physical size to ensure safety and fair play." (Utah Area Sports Manual).

If a primary child turns 12 during a season, that child may participate in youth sports when they are advanced to the Aaronic Priesthood or Young Women organization.

Generally speaking, the intent of the rules for 18- and 19-year old participants is to preserve fair play for the youth in the youth sports programs by directing these older players to the appropriate sports program for their circumstances.

19-year olds should not participate in youth sports, even if they are still in high school, but should instead be invited to play with adult teams or serve as coaches and officials for youth teams.

Likewise, players who have graduated high school, or whose class has graduated high school, are not eligible to play youth sports and should be invited to play with the adult teams, or serve as coaches and officials for youth teams. Exceptions, such as for 16- and 17-year old high school graduates, will be considered on a case by case basis.

Note that no one under the age of 18 can play on an adult team. If a youth turns 18 during the season, he or she may choose to either finish the season with the youth team, or play the remainder of the season with the adult team. If a participant chooses to play on the adult team, participation on the youth team in that sport is no longer allowed.

For sports that take place during the school year (such as basketball and volleyball), an 18-year old must still be attending high school with his class to be eligible. If a person has graduated, or his or her class has graduated, that player is no longer eligible to play youth sports.

If an 18-year old young man happens to be ordained an Elder while still in high school, he is still eligible to play with his youth team for the remainder of that season, but afterward must move on to participate in adult sports. (Players should generally play with the group they affiliate with for church attendance).

For the purposes of eligibility in summer sports (such as softball and flag football), graduated seniors are considered to still be "seniors" until the new school year starts in the fall. Consequently, an 18 year old graduated senior is still eligible to play youth sports during the summer following graduation. However,

once 19 years old, this youth is no longer eligible for youth sports.

One Team

“Individuals may only participate on one church sports team during the same season. The only exception to this rule applies to co-ed play.” (Utah Area Sports Manual)

Those who are eligible to play for more than one team must choose which team to play for, and play for just that team. Those who have played for one team are ineligible to play for another in that same season.

School Sports

The Utah Area Sports handbooks says:

Players who have the opportunity to participate in school programs under the jurisdiction of the High School Activities Association, or players who are members of officially-sponsored Junior College, College or University teams, will be asked to make a choice between that and the church sports program for that sport.

Once any such player has participated with the school team in a scheduled game of a particular sport, that decision is firm for that season and tournament play of that sport. Prior to that first game, if the player leaves the school squad, he/she would be eligible to participate with the ward team for the remainder of stake play and thereafter any tournament play for which they qualify.

An individual may play for both Church and school teams until the first scheduled school game. A participant who has been a member of a school team after the beginning of Church play is not eligible to join or rejoin the Church team during the current season, even though school play may end before Church play ends.

Be aware that the jurisdiction of the High School Activities Association includes grades 9 through 12, meaning that once a 9th grader has participated on a school team, that youth is ineligible to play church sports in that sport that season, even if the school sports season has ended, and even if the 9th grade for that youth happens at a middle school or jr. high school.

Boundaries and Residency

The Utah Area Sports manual states:

Generally, all team members should live within the boundaries of the team’s ward. Any exceptions require the approval of the stake presidency.

If a bishop feels this rule would do a disservice to an individual or family, an exception may be requested. A Rule Waiver Request must be completed and approved by the bishops and stake presidents involved. The approved Rule Waiver Request is given to the appropriate sports specialist for review and conformity with Church policies.

During a specific sport season, an individual who moves from a ward may continue to participate with the former ward for the remainder of the season for that particular sport, or participate with the new ward. Once a person participates in the sports program of the new ward, he or she is not eligible to participate with the former ward. Working through the ward sports specialist, the bishopric should add the name of the new individual to the Eligibility Declaration and Team Roster.

Returning missionaries, students, and military personnel are immediately eligible to participate when the bishop certifies their eligibility. Their names should be added to the Eligibility Declaration and Team Roster.

Note that since drafting the manual, Utah Area Sports has created the “out of stake rule.” All persons on a team, whether LDS or not, must reside within the geographic boundaries of that team’s stake. Exceptions will not be approved for players living outside of the stake.

Friends of other faiths

Youth who are not of our faith are encouraged to participate in church sports, however, they must hold to all the same playing and eligibility requirements that church members must abide by, including boundary and age requirements.

From the Utah Area Sports manual:

Interested non-members are encouraged to participate in the sports program. Those who choose to participate are subject to all policies and practices of the Church sports program.

During a game, a team must always have on the court or field a majority of players who are either Church members or members of a Church family. (A Church family is one with at least one baptized member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Member of a Church family means any individual living permanently or temporarily with a Church family.)