

A Vision for Sustainability and Sportsmanship

West End Slo-pitch Association – 16 January 2023

Executive Summary

As the League begins its 45th season, the Commission has been reflecting to ensure that all Members, old and new, continue to strive towards the league's original objectives while ensuring that WESA evolves as a League.

The West End Slo-pitch Association (WESA)'s purpose as defined by its Constitution is to provide the opportunity for those who support the bonds of LGBTQ2+ fellowship to play slo-pitch softball, and to foster, develop, and promote the game within a spirit of sportsmanship.

As you are aware, the League has two divisions. We know that within each division, and even within a team, it is necessary to have a blend of members in terms of personality and ability.

That being said, the Divisional structure is currently unbalanced. One division is bursting at the seams with 13 teams and 192 players, and another division has excess capacity with only 6 teams and 74 players. As borne out by the NAGAAA (North American Gay Amateur Athletic Alliance) ratings, this results in players and teams with greatly varying skill sets and creates an unequal playing field.

Over the next two seasons, the Commission would like to see the League achieve three main objectives:

1. A more balanced divisional structure for sustainable growth by renaming and re-branding our divisions and ending any stigmas associated with the previous names;
2. Create a more level playing field within our divisions by encouraging members to join the division that most closely matches their skill sets, abilities, personality, and approach to the game. This will be facilitated by creating and hosting new skill development sessions for members and coaches; and
3. Enhance the membership playing experience and everyone's happiness in softball by sharing and supporting this new vision.

Objective 1: the Commission has considered multiple alternatives as outlined in this white paper and concluded that renaming and re-branding the divisions would best facilitate sustainable growth of the League.

Objective 2: Last year's Commission began this work by implementing mandatory rookie-member skills camps that allowed us to guide members new to WESA into the appropriate division of play based on their skill set. We will learn from last years' experience and improve on the process to ensure these camps occur smoothly and efficiently. In addition, this year's Commission will be reaching out with a call to action for some of our returning members to migrate divisions.

Objective 3: Following the changes, step 3 of this process will be for all Members to come together and end any stigmas or myths associated with the previous names. The Commission recognizes that Objective 3 is important and a difficult objective. To achieve it, we need you, the members of WESA, to share the vision and assist in executing the plan.

The objectives above will bring about changes to our structure and our League, but similarities and connections to the past, a past that so many have benefited from and feel strongly about, will continue. Together we can adapt to ongoing changes and make WESA an even better place to have fun, meet new friends and enjoy the sport of slo-pitch softball. The Commission is confident the changes described in this white paper will enhance the membership experience.

For those interested in exploring the topics more in-depth, please continue to next page for the full analysis including data and the philosophy used to come to our conclusions.

Thank you, WESA 2023 Commission

A Vision for Sustainability and Sportsmanship

West End Slo-pitch Association – 16 January 2023

A Vision for Sustainability and Sportsmanship

The West End Slo-pitch Association (WESA)'s purpose and objectives are defined by our Constitution and include providing and protecting the opportunity for those who support the bonds of LGBTQ2+ fellowship to play slo-pitch softball, and to foster, develop, promote, and regulate play within proper safeguards and the spirit of true sportsmanship.

As the League begins its 45th season, we reflect on these lofty purposes and objectives, try to ensure that all of us as Members continue to strive towards them, and as a Commission continue to lead the evolution of our League.

For many years now, discussion about our divisional structure has been taking place. The discussion has arisen as WESA has grown and at times experienced growing pains. The last major structural change occurred in 2004. That season, for the second time in our history, the League created two divisions, D and C. Not all members were happy with this change; the League had 12 teams in 2003 and dropped to 10 teams in 2004. The change was made to bring about more balance and ensure a more level playing field. It proved to be the correct decision. WESA membership has continued to expand ever since, and more importantly it has enhanced the playing experience.

Our growth has been welcome and for the most part it has been successful. Now, we are reaching our limits and some changes will be required to ensure our future will be sustainable. We have the benefit of decades of history and results to learn from. We know that a divisional structure that groups together like skilled players enhances the playing experience for our members. We know that within a division, and within a team, it is necessary to have a blend of members in terms of personality and ability. We know that in a divisional structure, to achieve sustainability and balance, there must be respect and belief within and between divisions. We know that our policy of team formation through a universal player draft fosters our purpose. We know that our popular policy of joining with a buddy fosters our purpose.

Objectives

Over the next 2 seasons, the Commission would like to see the League achieve three main objectives:

1. A more balanced divisional structure for sustainable growth, now and in the future;
2. Create a more level playing field within our divisions by reducing the skills gap between players in the same division; and
3. Enhance the membership playing experience, create more joy in softball.

How will the League try to achieve these?

1. Renaming and re-branding our divisions. Ending any stigmas or myths associated to the previous names;
2. A) Encouraging members to join the division that most closely matches their skill sets, their abilities, their personality, and approach to the game;
B) Creating and hosting new skill development sessions for members and coaches. We will have frequent and accessible clinics to offer training and guidance to our members. We will provide more guidance, direction, and support for our coaches to ensure that teams are well managed; and
3. The League needs you, our membership, to share and support our vision and help us with this plan.

Growing Pains

Since 2003, an analysis of membership data tells us a few things. In the D division, the source of growth is new members to WESA. Historically, in the C division, the source of growth is members migrating from the D division. This natural path of migration and growth does not always flow smoothly. In the first decade of our D and C divisional structure, there was very limited migration from one division to the other. In 2014, the C division fielded only 4 teams. The League was at a critical crossroads. We had an ever-expanding D division and shrinking C division. The potential existed that our divisional structure could fold into one without divisions, creating an unbalanced level of skill between players and teams. Through the power of persuasion, the League has been successful in kick starting a migration path. This has benefited both divisions. The C division has grown to 6 teams, while at the same time undergoing change and emerging with a more progressive and positive culture. Migrating players have created more space within the D division for new players to join. However, the underlying issue still remains. We have an unbalanced structure, one division bursting at the seams, another division with capacity, and players and teams with skill sets that result in a playing field that is not level enough within a division. The status quo will not be sustainable for WESA.

A Vision for Sustainability and Sportsmanship

West End Slo-pitch Association – 16 January 2023

Current Membership Data

The (North American Gay Amateur Athletic Alliance) NAGAAA Questions (NQ) are a standardized series of softball skill questions. For each 'yes' answer a player receives 1 point. The number of YESes is summed to give each player a NAGAAA Question Level. Based on an individual's NQ Level, NAGAAA guides players into appropriate divisions. Here is a table that matches Question Level to NAGAAA division:

Division	NQ Level
E	Less than 9
D	9 to 12
C	13 to 15

WESA uses the NAGAAA Questions to allow members to participate in the annual Gay Softball World Series (GSWS) tournament hosted by NAGAAA. WESA does not use the NAGAAA Questions to enforce joining a specific division here in Vancouver. Nevertheless, the data presented here is useful for analysis when looking at relative player skill sets and abilities in aggregate within, and across, divisions.

As you can see, WESA has blended divisions. This is because WESA members have the choice of division to join. Our blended divisions work for our league in Vancouver. We have had blended divisions since 2004 and it is our intent to continue to have blended divisions, albeit in a more balanced and sustainable structure.

WESA Division	2022 Total	NAGAAA E	NAGAAA D	NAGAAA C	Mean NQ Level	Standard Deviation
D members	192	117	75	0	7.6	2.0
C members	74	12	43	19	10.4	2.4

These stats mean that in the 2022 season:

- 61% of WESA D division members were NAGAAA E eligible.
- 74.3% of WESA C division members were NAGAAA D or E eligible.
- 48.5% - almost half - of **all** WESA members were NAGAAA E eligible.
- The skills gap between players in the same division as measured by standard deviation was 2.4 in WESA C and 2.0 in WESA D.

Alternative Divisional Structure: NAGAAA Model

Option 1: WESA could adjust our divisional structure to align with NAGAAA more closely. The data above dictates that the result would be an E division and a D division. The D division would have to incorporate all the players with a NAGAAA C level. The Commission does not see this as a feasible option. The D division would experience an influx of skilled players with leadership roles, causing significant disruption, while the E division would suffer from a lack of leadership and softball knowledge.

Option 2: WESA could fully align to NAGAAA eligibility requirements and create 3 divisions of play: E, D and C. Under this option, we would have to blur the lines and create blended divisions as we do now, else the C division would be too small to be feasible, and the E division would be too big to find enough team leaders, coaches, and mentors. It is fair to assume that the end result of a blended 3 division structure would be a bell curve with most members being in the middle joining the D division, while the E and C divisions would remain as small divisions and the playing experience would suffer. However, this option may be possible in the future when WESA is larger, has more than 24 teams, and can support 3 divisions of play with a larger membership base. This structure has positive future possibilities.

Alternative Divisional Structure: Competitive and Recreational

Option 3: Under this option, we could re-name our 2 divisions by attempting to use an adjective to describe the division. Examples could be the Recreational Division and the Competitive Division, or the Beginner Division and the Advanced Division. This option would not be new to WESA. In the 1990s the League had two divisions of play, Competitive and Recreational. They collapsed back into one division of play. It is not an easy task to name a division using an adjective.

A Vision for Sustainability and Sportsmanship

West End Slo-pitch Association – 16 January 2023

Currently, both D and C divisions are competitive, and both are recreational. We have beginner, intermediate, and advanced players in both divisions. The Commission sees this option as infeasible since we know from experience that a division with blended abilities and personalities is key to achieving our 3 objectives.

Alternative Divisional Structure: Generic Divisional Names

Option 4: Under this option, we could re-name our 2 divisions using a generic label, intended to be non-subjective and non-descriptive. For example, geographic labels such as the Pacific Division and the Mountain Division. While this approach solves some of the subjectivity of using hierarchical divisional descriptors, it suffers from being too limited to achieve anything other than a name change. To bring about more sustainability and balance to our League we need a more progressive approach to divisional structure.

Since none of these alternative structures suited our needs here in Vancouver, the Commission has decided to rename and rebrand our divisions, along with introducing and supporting some changes.

Objective 1: Balanced divisional structure for sustainable growth

Step 1 of this process will be to rename and re-brand our divisions. Step 2 of this process will be for the whole League, all of us together, to end any stigmas or myths associated to the previous names. To achieve sustainability and balance, there must be respect and belief within and between divisions. We've come a long way in recent years to accomplish this, and now the League is ready for the next step. Our League will be a better and more sustainable with two healthy divisions.

- **Tier 1** (*formerly known as the D division*)
Best suited for players of all abilities and ages who prioritize a slower paced game, including beginner and novice softball players, who may not yet have a firm grasp on the fundamentals of the game.
- **Tier 2** (*formerly known as the C division*)
Best suited for more experienced softball players who have a good grasp of the fundamentals of the game and who appreciate a more efficient, fluid, and faster paced game.

It is our thoughts that these names help us towards our objectives of balancing our divisional structure. We need a "made in Vancouver" solution that reflects the structure we are trying to create. Our divisions need to remain a blend of skill sets and abilities, without falsely anchoring them to a label that does not accurately reflect its composition.

Objective 2: Level the playing field within our divisions by reducing the skills gap

Why is narrowing the skills gap so important? Currently, the skill differential between players within both divisions results in a substantial gap between the highest skilled members/teams and the lowest skilled members/teams. The resulting lack of parity results in many members having to always sit on the bench and play less than a fair share of half games. This reduces the overall playing experience for beginner and less skilled players while protecting a sense of privilege for the higher skilled players, creating a divide in the membership. While a competitive spirit is allowed and encouraged in sport, and there are winners and losers, it is also the responsibility of the Commission and the League to promote and regulate play within proper safeguards and the spirit of true sportsmanship.

Step 1 of this process started last season with mandatory rookie skills camps that allowed us to guide members who are new to WESA into the appropriate division of play based on their skill sets, their abilities, and their knowledge of the sport. This will continue this coming season.

Step 2 of this process is key to our future success. While we will continue to allow returning members to choose their division, we are reaching out with a call to action to some of our D-division members to migrate to Tier 2 in 2023.

First, let's review the membership data:

A Vision for Sustainability and Sportsmanship

West End Slo-pitch Association – 16 January 2023

74% of WESA C division members are NAGAAA D eligible. **Many of these members started in WESA's D division and successfully migrated to WESA C.**

The average player NQ level in C is just 10.4, much lower than the 13+ typically associated with a C division player. **10.4 is also lower than the NQ rating of the 26 highest rated members who played in WESA D in 2022, which means those players could reasonably expect to find a suitable place in Tier 2 in 2023.**

Further, no less than 32 different WESA D Division players successfully spared on multiple occasions in the WESA C division last year, providing empirical evidence that **there could be a good fit in Tier 2 for such players.**

Finally, the membership data posted above shows that the average player rating in the 2022 D Division was 7.6, lower than the 9+ typically associated with a D division player. **Almost half of WESA's membership falls into this cohort and it is incumbent upon the commission and the rest of the membership to make WESA an inviting space for these players.**

So, **what can a player migrating to Tier 2 in 2023 expect? Let's see what it would look like if the 26 WESA D players** mentioned above with an NQ > 10.4 decided to migrate to Tier 2, all else remaining equal. In that case the 2023 membership stats table might look something like this:

WESA Division	2022 Total	NAGAAA E	NAGAAA D	NAGAAA C	Mean NQ Level	Standard Deviation
Tier 1	166	117	49	0	7.0	1.6
Tier 2	100	12	69	19	10.6	1.9

What this means is that if those 26 players moved to Tier 2, average player ability in Tier 2 would only increase by 0.2 (recall it was 10.4 last year) but the standard deviation would tighten by 22%. In other words, **while the skill level doesn't change much, the skill gap between players shrinks considerably.**

Likewise in Tier 1, losing those 26 players does bring the average skill level down (7.6 to 7.0) but again, the skill gap between players narrows by 23%, meaning **overall, more members in both divisions should have a better playing experience**, which is our objective.

This model shows that contrary to received wisdom amongst many returning players, even if a small number of our more experienced players – less than 10% of our 2022 membership – voluntarily move to Tier 2, player abilities will coalesce more around the mean (i.e.: the skills gap shrinks) in **both** divisions, improving player experience for the vast majority (>95%) of all players, including those that moved.

We believe that persuasion is better than force, and we believe we have made a strong and logical argument in favour of voluntary migration. For every player that migrates to Tier 2, it creates space and capacity for new members to join Tier 1 and for returning Tier 1 members to have more opportunity to play and develop. Everyone can win with this approach, and it will help us achieve a more level playing field.

Step 3 of this process involves a new approach to skills training and coaching mentorship. In November, a well-attended coaches' retreat delivered several action items that will be worked on to support our coaches more. Members have long requested more targeted skills training opportunities. To that end, a skills development committee has been convened and is working towards developing an organized set of accessible and ongoing training sessions. Stay tuned for more details on these processes. More training and guidance for members and coaches will, in the long run, help reduce the skills gap and can lead to a more level playing field.

Objective 3: Enhance the membership playing experience

Most of us experience a lot of joy when we play softball. Let us ensure we share that joy and spread that joy to everyone on our team, on the field, in our League.

As a Commission, this is an important and difficult objective. We cannot be there on the field or in the dugout when joy is created and shared; we need our members to do that for us. Every year we witness it in action. We hear the game stories. We hear the behind-the-scenes stories. We hear the stories at our social events. We know you love WESA and

A Vision for Sustainability and Sportsmanship

West End Slo-pitch Association – 16 January 2023

gay softball just as much as we do. That's why our League is special. The joy we create moves beyond the field and into long lasting friendships and love.

As a Commission, all we can do is offer a vision and a plan to achieve our objectives. Then we need you, our membership to share our vision and help us with this plan. The objectives we have laid out will bring about changes to our structure, but many similarities will exist. We are striving to make improvements and adjustments to our League, and we are confident they will enhance the membership experience.

We foresee a balanced divisional structure with 10 teams in each Tier. While this likely will not be achieved for the 2023 season, it is possible to achieve this by the 2025 season. The following table shows the 2022 divisional team breakdown along with the projected 2023 breakdown:

	2022 Teams		2023 Teams
D division	13	Tier 1	10 or 11
C division	6	Tier 2	8 or 9

This more balanced structure should reduce the skills gap in Tier 1 and give players more opportunity to play full games. A much larger Tier 2 division becomes a “lake instead of a pond” and brings players with similar skill sets together, increasing the focus on creating joy through participation and fun.

A balanced League, set up for sustainable growth and to maximize player experience, where players can find a space that suits both their skills and their priorities, is what makes up our 2023-2025 vision.

WESA 2023 Commission