

Del Norte girls soccer players say they're Wounded Warriors

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The Del Norte High School girls varsity soccer program has just 16 athletes suited up to play this season. And there's no junior varsity squad.

The players say the reason is an unsafe high school soccer field that has caused numerous injuries and prompted parents to pull their daughters from the program.

The team spoke with one voice during a Del Norte Unified School District Board of Trustees meeting Sept. 12, pleading that something must be done to improve the soccer field's conditions.

They pointed out the many potholes across the playing surface, and goalie boxes that are nothing more than hardpacked dirt on hot days, mud puddles when it rains.

The players ticked off the injuries sustained just since last year — a sprained knee, a sprained ankle, a twice-sprained ankle, a broken ankle, a torn meniscus in the knee, and a torn Achilles tendon.

Second-year soccer coach Ashley Herrera said she didn't want to step between her players and the district's administrators. "My priority is to let them know the next steps in life. You have to speak up for yourselves to get what you want," Herrera said.

So the players brought their concerns to the board of trustees during the public-input portion of the school district meeting, when protocol means the trustees listen without commenting.

"It's happening every year. We deal with at least three injuries every year," said senior Lanaeya Botelho, the team's captain. "Our field has a bad reputation, especially for girls who do other sports."

The soccer players said many of their injuries carry over into winter sports, subsequently limiting their play on the girls basketball team.

Senior Melanie Alvarado said she no longer will practice on the soccer field, saving her play for games only. She said she was injured during her sophomore season. "It was in a home game versus Arcada, I stepped in a hole, tripped over another girl and tore my meniscus."

Robert Hadfield, the high school's athletic director for 21 years, said if he thought the soccer fields were unsafe, he wouldn't let the student athletes use them.

Both the boys and girls programs currently share the upper field, for practices and matches, while the lower field is off-limits while it's being evaluated for possible improvements, Hadfield said.

"We would like all the facilities to be in great shape," said Hadfield. "The upper field was re-sodded and new sprinklers installed last year. And we installed a new screen on the lower field to keep balls from going in the road," he said.

"But no one outside the school district is complaining about our surface, nor has any coach said to me they can't play on the field because it's not safe."

And, he said, he's not had any parents approach him about pulling their daughter from the soccer program because of unsafe field conditions. "The most-recently injured individual's mother stated she wouldn't let her daughter participate on the lower field. That's it," said Hadfield.

Meantime, said the players, the high school appears to be more focused on the football field's surface. "The football field has zero potholes," said senior Karmen Lucatero. "We've asked if we can play on that field, but they've deemed that off-limits, not even for the playoffs."

Hadfield wouldn't pit one program's facilities against another. "No one program is more important than the other," he said. "There is no quick fix. We could level and smooth it, but with any athletic facility, you get wear and tear.

"We unfortunately had a young lady hurt already this season. There's an inherent risk when you play sports."

