

# Proposal to add Soccer as a school sport

AN ANALYSIS OF THE INTEREST, INFRASTRUCTURE, AND BENEFITS

by Clark Fork Soccer Alliance



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# SUMMARY

Clark Fork Soccer Alliance formally requests that the Plains and Thompson Falls school districts co-operatively add Soccer as a school sport. We believe the time is right for Soccer players in our schools to represent our school districts. This document outlines the merits of our proposal and addresses many of the concerns expressed by school administrators.

## 1. The kids in your district want this, it is good for them, and it supports your mission.

We believe our players want Soccer to be a school sport. It will keep them active and promote healthy sport activities. Best of all, it directly aligns with your school mission.

## 2. Soccer as a school sport provides tremendous social benefits

Adding Soccer as a school sport is what the kids want. It would strengthen the equity and inclusivity in our schools and would promote a stronger school identity in Soccer-athletes.

## 3. Soccer provides an inclusive and different sport experience

We believe Soccer is for everyone and is unique in its player-determined problem-solving nature. Adding Soccer as a school sport would provide a different competitive athletic experience than current offerings.

## 4. Soccer has a robust and growing participation in our communities

Our yearly participation is rising and remains strong. Fall of 2022 has 17 girls and 20 boys playing in the oldest age group. Kids are already playing this sport, they now ask to play it for their schools.

## 5. Clark Fork Soccer has a successful fundraising history

We have regularly raised enough resources to fund our programming and are confident we can continue to meaningfully contribute to funding Soccer as a school sport

## 6. Travel distances would be the same or less for Soccer as for other school sports

If Soccer were added as a school sport the distance traveled would be below average compared to other activities at Plains High School on a per team and per student basis.

## 7. Our teams have had regular success against MHSA JV school programs

Our MHSA opponents have written letters in support of our request and attest to our competitiveness.

## 8. Plains High School has a below-average number of sports

Currently there are only 7 Class B schools who offer fewer sports than Plains. Adding Soccer as a school sport would not create 'too many' sports at PHS.

Clark Fork Soccer Alliance is excited at the prospect of adding Soccer as a school sport. We welcome your questions. Thank you for your consideration.

# THE IMPERATIVE

We believe **our proposal directly aligns with your school's mission.** It is the stated the mission of the Plains School District to:

- Partner with the community – we welcome the chance to work with you to meet the needs of our student-athletes
- Provide each student with a diverse education – this decision will further diversify your co-curricular activities
- Promote self-discipline, motivation, and excellence – our club philosophies, mission, and vision (found on our website) seek to teach sportsmanship, character, and achievement. We believe our mission and your mission are aligned
- Co-curricular activities are child-centered – what is more child-centered than honoring the request of the youth in our community in making Soccer a school sport



**PLAINS PUBLIC SCHOOLS**  
Foundations for the Future

## Our Mission

*The mission of the Plains School District, in partnership with the community, serves to provide each student with a diverse education in a safe, supportive, caring environment that promotes self-discipline, motivation, and excellence in learning. The school's organization, curriculum, and co-curricular activities are child-centered to assist our leaders of tomorrow in succeeding and contributing responsibly to a global community.*

Plains School District 1  
412 Rittenour St.  
Plains, MT 59859



Kids are not playing sports as much as they used to. We all see it, and we're all worried by it. According to the Aspen Institute (a leading non-profit in youth sports) only 38% of kids played a sport in the year before Covid and only 24% of kids are active for 60min a day or more.

We must do better – again according to the Aspen Institute's 2019 State of Play Report (available online or on request) children who are regularly involved in sport are:

- 90% less likely to be obese and have lower healthcare costs in adulthood
- Have higher test scores and are more likely to seek education beyond high school
- Are less likely to smoke, use drugs, or engage or become pregnant
- Have higher earnings in adulthood and are more productive at work
- Are happier, have lower rates of depression, and higher self-esteem

The imperative is clear – we must get more kids involved in sport. The Aspen Institute has 8 recommended actions to improve youth sport participation, the first recommendation is to “ask kids what they want.” To get kids active we must support and encourage them to play the sports they want to play. This is why we come to you now – at the core of this request are the youth Soccer players who want to play their sport for their schools:

*“I love soccer, so I want soccer to be a school sport. If you do, I will probably play a lot more.”*

~BT, age 12

*“I play soccer because I like the intensity and being a rage monster and letting my emotions out while playing... I ask you to make soccer [a sport] for your school.” ~ ER, age 13*

*“I would be ecstatic if PHS welcomed soccer as a school sport... soccer would be a wonderful addition to PHS” ~OH, age 18*

We ask you to embrace their Soccer interest and support them in representing their school

# SOCIAL IMPACTS

Adding Soccer improves the equity of your school system. Many sports have representation in our schools - Cross Country, Volleyball, Football, Wrestling, Basketball, Drama, Golf, Softball, and Track. Soccer-athletes are not allowed to represent the sport they love at their home district - while many other sports kids do have this opportunity. This is in no way fair to the Soccer kids in our communities.

**The school identity will be enhanced** with the addition of Soccer. Many kids tie sports and extracurricular activities to a big part of their individual identity. These sports provide scholastic, athletic, and psychological growth opportunities. The lack of school sponsored Soccer undermines these kids' opportunities to build that identity.

Soccer is a great equalizer in youth athletics, **it is an incredibly inclusive game** and there is room for everybody in the game. A kid doesn't have to be big (football), tall (basketball), or fast (track) to have a place on the pitch – there is a place for all players regardless of shape, size, or athleticism. Soccer offers a different sport experience for players who don't feel they fit with other athletic activities. We believe there is a place on the field for every able-bodied kid in your school. At a time when we all are concerned about declining sports participation in kids today, adding Soccer will include more kids in youth athletics.

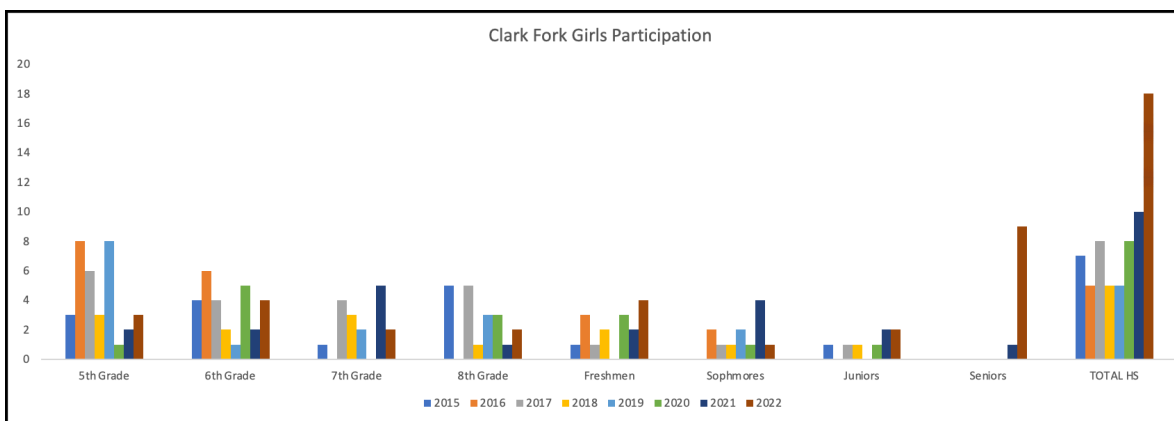
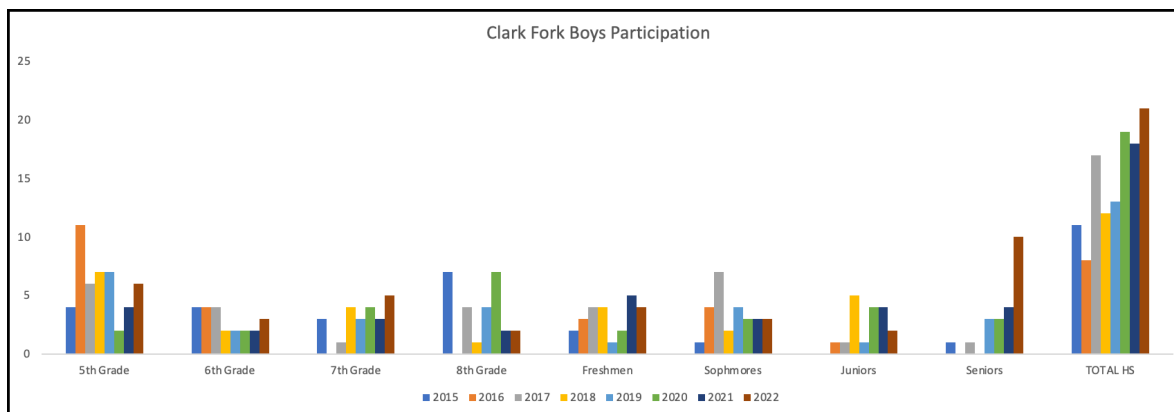
Soccer is a game of player driven decision-making; there are no time-outs or huddles to draw-up a play. Instead, problem-solving must be taught ahead of time and it is the players, in the game, who must solve the problem the opponent poses. Furthermore, Soccer is a game of geometry with a blend of tactical and strategic actions – similar to basketball and hockey but with many greater outcomes because of the greater player numbers on the field. It can seem a game of chaos – and it is the players who must organize to create a goal. We believe **Soccer teaches a unique mix of teamwork, responsibility, and independent problem-solving in a way not currently offered at Plains High School.**

# PARTICIPATION

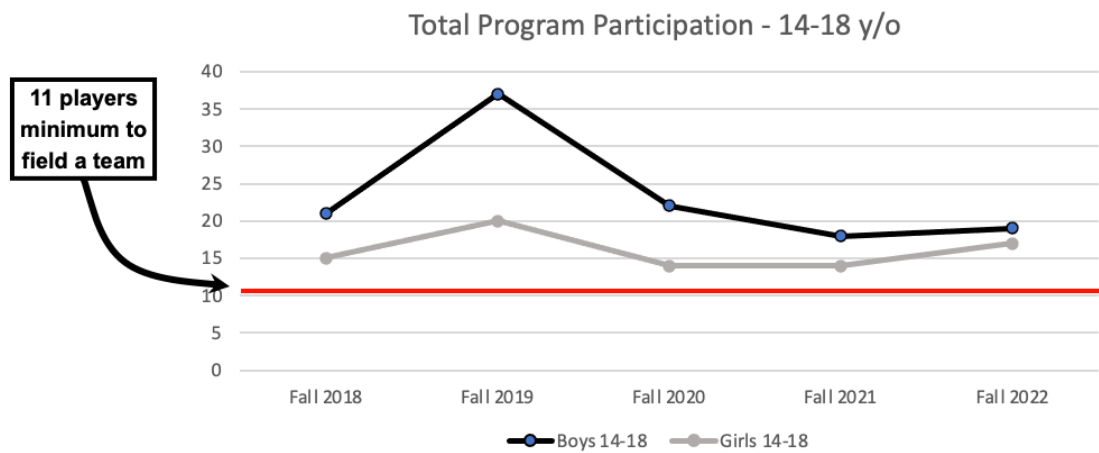
Soccer has been thriving in Sanders County for +25-years, Clark Fork Soccer Alliance offers Soccer programming in Plains, Thompson Falls, St. Regis, Superior, and Hot Springs.

Currently, across our 5 communities we are averaging 250-300 players between the ages 3-19 years old each fall season. In the past 3 years Hot Springs has added 3 new teams, St. Regis has added 1 team, and Thompson Falls has added 2 teams. Excitingly, the Trout Creek School system is exploring adding middle-school Soccer as a school sport.

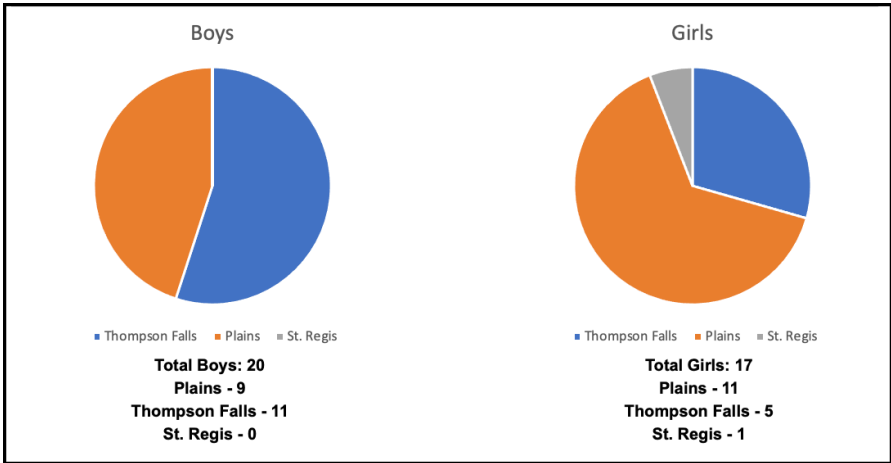
At the Junior High and High School ages we have cooperative teams between Plains and Thompson Falls for U19 boys, U19 Girls, and U15 co-ed teams. As you can see below, our total participation (for both genders) has regularly risen (right most columns):



Clark Fork Soccer Alliance’s participation has been robust enough that we have successfully fielded boys and girls Soccer teams at the high school level every year since 2018.



We understand the administration’s concerns about participation rates for Soccer. However, we believe these concerns to be unfounded. From the Plains community alone our Fall 2022 high-school participation is 11 girls and 9 boys:



To address concerns about participation and to advocate for all our players in all our communities we have crafted our proposal to include a request to co-op with Thompson Falls. We believe that our past success and current fall registration numbers indicate that a Plains-Thompson Falls Soccer program will be **immediately viable** and will see continued success in the coming years.

# FINANCIAL

We all know the financial difficulties of the families in our district, and though Clark Fork Soccer Alliance makes great effort to minimize the 'pay-to-play' model, it is unavoidable as an independent club sport. There are many families in need in our community and we would be able to avoid alienating them by eliminating the financial barriers to participation. Our club offers many financial scholarships to provide access to Soccer, but there are many expenses we are not able to cover, and some families instead choose to not register their kids at all.

Soccer has been successfully self-funded for more than 25 years, and we have an excellent fundraising history. Our total revenue in 2021 was more than \$41,000; independent fundraising revenues for the last 5 years are listed below:

Fundraising					
	2022 YTD	2021	2020	2019	2018
Sponsors	\$ 6,000	\$ 10,500	\$ 8,200	\$ 8,050	\$ 5,350
Cleat sales	\$ 60	\$ 193	\$ 140	\$ 190	\$ 270
Donation	\$ 965	\$ 1,000	\$ 1,075	\$ 495	\$ 865
Grant	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 11,000	\$ 1,000	\$ -
Bake Sale	\$ -	\$ 670	\$ -	\$ 569	\$ -
Season Ticket Holder	\$ -	\$ 1,100	\$ 2,000	\$ -	\$ -
Raffle	\$ 1,526	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 8,551</b>	<b>\$ 13,463</b>	<b>\$ 22,415</b>	<b>\$ 10,304</b>	<b>\$ 6,485</b>

NOTE: 2022 YTD does not reflect fall fundraising

**You can have confidence that if you choose to add Soccer as a school-sport we will bring the same energy to fundraising for the school that we have to our Soccer club.**

## Soccer Infrastructure

In addition to fundraising, our Soccer club offers a ready-made program that can help provide:

- A robust feeder program – as shown above, we have a very wide pyramid that is regularly providing developmental and competitive Soccer opportunities to hundreds of kids each season. This feeder program is the foundation of our success and will translate to a successful school program as well.
- Referees – we have 9 adult and 6 teenage US Soccer certified referees in our community. In 2021 these referees covered over 70 Soccer games across western Montana. Several are seeking MOA certification. This referee pool would be a great resource for any Soccer program in our community.
- Fields – as you well know, the Soccer fields built and maintained by Wildhorse Sports Association, are a quality place for kids to play. If PHS utilizes this space for Softball and Baseball activities, it should be simple to add Soccer to any use agreement as well.
- Used equipment – we have quality Soccer equipment and can hand-down gently used balls, cones, pinnies, and more to help keep costs down.
- Coaching – many of the coaches at Clark Fork Soccer Alliance have invested time and money to gain training as Soccer coaches. We have several E-license coaches, 2 D-license coaches, and 1 C-license coach. Higher licenses reflect additional education and training in coaching methods. These coaches are available, should the school district choose, to help coach at PHS.

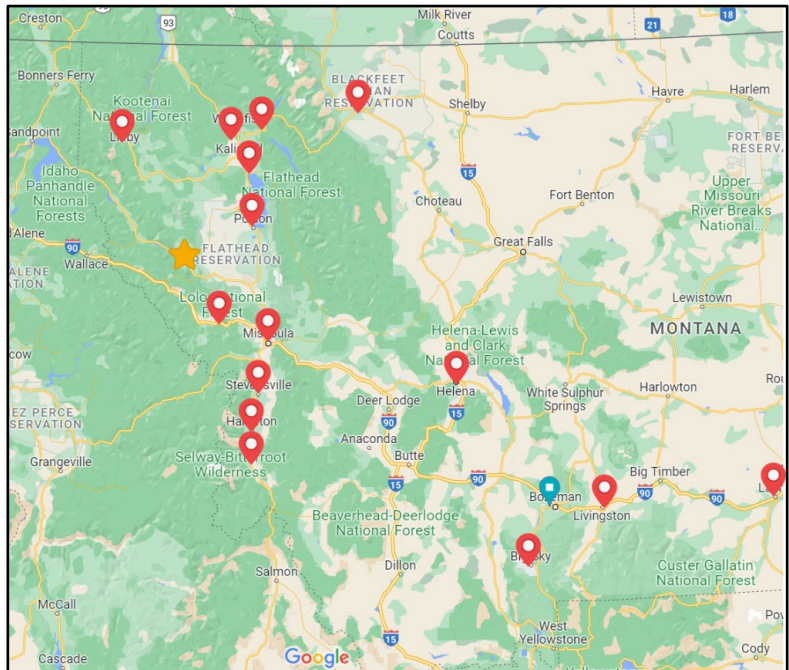
**Again, we hope our proposal inspires confidence that an affirmative decision to add Soccer as a sport at PHS would be well supported by the existing Soccer infrastructure.**

# TRANSPORTATION

Many of the opponents we would play against are generally as close as other Class B school opponents. We understand that there is concern about how far Soccer teams would have to travel and the desire is to play “like schools within our region”. While we don’t have a solution for the second part, we can offer the following analysis:

1. There are 11 MHSA schools in western Montana who offer Soccer:

- Columbia Falls
- Whitefish
- Browning
- Libby
- Bigfork
- Polson
- Loyola
- Frenchtown
- Stevensville
- Hamilton
- Corvallis



2. Estimated travel would be 1666 – 1739 miles
  - a. Assuming a traditional home-and-away series against conference opponents in either the Northern or Southern Conference
  - b. Assuming a worst-case-scenario of a non-conference away game at an eastern district opponent (which would happen once every 4 years)
3. Using the 2021-2022 mileage cost of \$2.40/mi transportation costs would be ~\$4,000
4. Assuming participation in 2023 is similar to current 2022 fall registration (20 boys, 17 girls)
5. Using actual participation and miles traveled for other sport offerings at PHS from 2021-2022 for comparison, including post-season miles traveled
  - a. NOTE: we did not include wrestling's post-season mileage because transport costs were shared among multiple schools.

Given the above assumptions, a **school Soccer program at PHS would be 5<sup>th</sup> for total miles traveled** among the sport offerings at PHS, very similar to Softball and Volleyball, and less than Basketball and Track.

<b>Miles traveled for 2021-2022 seasons</b>	
<u>Sport</u>	<u>Round Trip</u>
Cross Country Total	588.0
Girls Wrestling Total	634.2
HS Football Total	925.0
HS Softball Total	1,599.2
HS Soccer Northern District Total	1,666.0
HS Soccer Southern District Total	1,739.6
HS Volleyball Total	1,801.0
Golf Total	2,172.8
Basketball Total	2,220.8
HS Track Total	2,789.0
Wrestling Total	3,008.4

Furthermore, Soccer would be one of the cheapest sports in terms of transportation costs per student. Depending on which conference we participated in, Soccer would either be the cheapest per-student transportation cost, or 3<sup>rd</sup> cheapest per-student transportation cost.

<b>Estimated transportation costs per student-athlete</b>					
<u>Sport</u>	<u>Round Trip</u>	<u>Milage Unit Cos</u>	<u>Total Transport Cost</u>	<u>2021-22 Participants</u>	<u>Transport cost per participant</u>
HS Soccer Northern District Total	1,666.0	\$ 2.40	\$ 3,998.40	36	\$ 111.07
Cross Country Total	588.0	\$ 0.59	\$ 343.98	3	\$ 114.66
Golf Total	2,172.8	\$ 0.59	\$ 1,271.09	11	\$ 115.55
HS Soccer Southern District Total	1,739.6	\$ 2.40	\$ 4,175.04	36	\$ 115.97
HS Football Total	925.0	\$ 2.40	\$ 2,220.00	19	\$ 116.84
Basketball Total	2,220.8	\$ 2.40	\$ 5,329.92	34	\$ 156.76
HS Volleyball Total	1,801.0	\$ 2.40	\$ 4,322.40	24	\$ 180.10
Wrestling Total	3,008.4	\$ 0.59	\$ 1,774.96	9	\$ 197.22
HS Softball Total	1,599.2	\$ 2.40	\$ 3,838.08	18	\$ 213.23
Girls Wrestling Total	634.2	\$ 2.40	\$ 1,522.08	4	\$ 380.52
HS Track Total	2,789.0	\$ 2.40	\$ 6,693.60	13	\$ 514.89

Thus, adding Soccer as a school sport means **more competition closer to home** and would not divergently increase transportation costs compared to other sports.



# COMPETITION

Since 2018 our teams have been competing regularly against Hellgate, Columbia Falls, Whitefish, Big Fork, and Loyola High School JV teams – and we have a record of excellent competitive play. Coaches and Activities Directors from these schools have written letters in support of our request and attesting to our competitiveness. Here are a few of their comments:

For many years, Whitefish High School (WHS) has hosted Clark Fork for one (or more) JV games; our varsity schedule is more strictly limited to include conference opponents, etc. Those games are regularly our JV team's most competitive and best matches. Based on those years of games, I would fully expect that Clark Fork's 'new' high school team would immediately compete well in Class A and indeed win games against several schools currently competing in MHSAA Class A Soccer.

John Lacey  
Whitefish HS Boys Soccer Coach  
506 Kalispell Avenue  
Whitefish, MT 59937

.....

I've been very impressed at Clark Fork's numbers and their ability to compete at the Class A level. They've played our JV teams for the last five seasons, and I'd have to say the last two seasons, they could have easily competed with our Varsity teams. Our varsity teams have been in the State Final for the last two years. They are well coached and the soccer club is incredibly organized. Plains could jump right into our Northern A conference and compete with all of the teams in it. (Polson, Libby, Columbia Falls, Bigfork, Whitefish)

Yours in sport,

O'Brien Byrd  
cfwildcatsoccer@gmail.com

.....

As a long-time coach, I have coached and watched a lot of high school soccer over the years, and I believe that Clark Fork would do well within the class A level. Having seen class A play, there are a lot of different skill levels just within this league alone. While I do think Clark Fork might struggle at first against some of the perennial favorites in Class A soccer, I think they would be able to compete right away with the middle to bottom third of the league. However, there is also a good possibility that within a couple years of joining the league, they could be competing within the playoffs.

Sincerely,

Jay Anderson  
406-531-8802  
Boys' Soccer Coach - Hellgate High School  
6<sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher – Washington Middle School

Part of our motivation to request addition as a school sport is our competitiveness. Our fall teams are regularly competing with these JV games, our teams are winning most of their games. **They are ready to play the varsity teams** – which requires school sport status. Many of these same players participate in our spring programming as well. Our spring teams are competing with Select and Premier level teams (think Class A and AA) programs – and are winning those games as well.

In short, our Soccer teams have a record of on-field success, and we believe this success would continue to succeed on the field if Soccer were added as a school sport.

# SCHOOLS COMPARISON

There are 4 other schools in Montana with similar enrollment who offer Soccer:

- Lone Peak High School – 111 students
- Troy High School\* - 135 students
- Sweet Grass County High School – 166 students
- Loyola Sacred Heart High School – 168 students

NOTE: These numbers are based on 2020-2021 enrollments.

\*Troy co-ops with Libby High School

Plains is the 14th smallest Class B school based on 2021-2022 enrollment, out of 40 total class B schools. A few notable facts about sports in Plains compared to other Class B schools:

- Plains is currently in a 7-way tie at 25th out of 40 schools in terms of offered extracurricular activities (meaning 33 other class-B schools offer more sports).
- Compared to other class-B schools only 7 schools offer fewer sports than Plains.
- If Soccer were added, Plains would be in an 8-way tie for 7th (meaning there would be 13 other class-B schools that offer as at least as many sports).

Our conclusion from these data is that **adding Soccer does it significantly alter Plains' total sport portfolio compared to other Class B Schools.**

NOTE: This analysis was done May of 2022 and involved calling each Class-B school district to confirm their sport offerings. Data may now be old as some districts may have changed their sport offerings. We did not survey or include band or drama.

# SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

## LETTERS OF SUPPORT

### Player letters

Dear Plains School Board,

I would really like soccer to become a school sport because I feel like soccer is becoming a big part of our community and it becoming a school sport would connect these two things well, soccer and our public school.

Soccer is an amazing sport to play, anyone can play it and have fun. The rules are reasonably simple and it is a great place to build lasting relationships. I think that if soccer was a school sport it would encourage a lot of people to play and it would help get kids involved in a healthy activity.

I hope you will consider it.

Dear Plains school

Please make soccer a school sport. Soccer is the best.

I have played soccer since 5 year old. I Love Sport!!!

age 10

Dear plain school

please make soccer a school

sport because people can't

always walk to practice

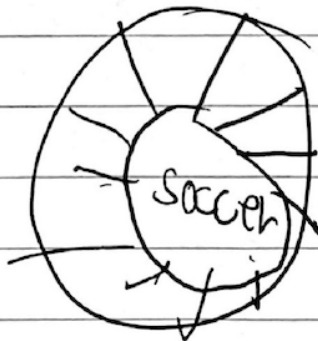
they can just go to

the field and people

have more options

for a school sport

from ■ ■ ■ age 10



Dear, Plains school

I love soccer because soccer is a fun sport to play for all ages I love soccer so much. kids love it so much it's an amazing sport so I say yes to soccer being a school sport

age: 10

Dear Plains school,

I love playing soccer because it is fun and we get to play with other people from other places and it is fun. I've been playing for 8 years now but it will be 9 in July.

age 11

Dear, Plains School

Please make soccer a school sport. I want you to make soccer a school sport ~~because~~ because a bunch of kids play it and it's a very cool sport. It can get out energy that people like to get rid of, because parents don't want them running all over the house. I like soccer because you can work with a big team and have fun. I think if people knew you made it a school sport then more people would join. I also think if you made soccer a school sport then people would start playing it every year. So I really want you guys to make soccer a school sport.

Sincerely

Age: 11



Dear School

I like Soccer because it's a fun sport and it keeps me active. If soccer was a school sport I would still play.

From,

age 12

Dear Plain's School,

I love playing soccer because I can learn new skills and learn to run faster. One thing I love about soccer is that I can make new friends. I've been playing soccer since I was 3 years old. If you made soccer a new sport I would sign up and play every year.

age 11



Dear Plains Public School, I play soccer because I like the intensity and being a rage monster and letting all my emotions out while playing the game. Another thing is it keeps me in shape and outside not being lazy, it makes me happy and in a positive mind set. I would ask to make soccer, my game for your school if you would consider it.

7th grade 13

Dear plains School

I Love Soccer, ~~th~~so I want soccer to be a school sport. If you do, I will probably play a lot more and more people will probably join.

Sincerely

age: 12, almost 13

Dear,

Plains Public Schools

I play soccer not only because it keeps me active and in shape, but the relationships I form with my teammates. I love how much soccer lets me be outside in awesome weather. I like how soccer opens my mind to find new solutions. I love soccer because it is so fun. If soccer was offered as a school sport I would love to play and represent my school ~~and~~ as well as have fun with my classmates.

■■■■ - 7th grade

Dear School,

I like to play soccer because I get to have fresh air and having a competition with friends. If soccer was a school sport, I would play it.

From, ■■■■  
age 11

# School Coach and Administrator Letters of Support

## References

1. Nick Laatsch - Assistant Principal and Activities Director, Hellgate High School, [nalaatsch@mcpsmt.org](mailto:nalaatsch@mcpsmt.org), 406-728-2400
2. Troy Bowman - Activities Director, Columbia Falls High School, [t\\_bowman@cfmtschoools.net](mailto:t_bowman@cfmtschoools.net), 406-892-6500
3. Thomas Clark – Varsity Girls Soccer Coach, Columbia Falls High School
4. Mark Gailbrath, Whitefish High School, 406-261-938
5. John Lacey - Varsity Boys Soccer Coach, Whitefish High School
6. O'Brien Byrd - Varsity Boys Soccer Coach, Columbia Falls High School
7. Jay Anderson - Varsity Boys Soccer Coach, Hellgate High School

TB

Troy Bowman

Re: Request for reference for Clark Fork Soccer

To: Nick Lawyer

April 19, 2022 at 5:01 PM

Siri Found a Contact

Troy Bowman

t\_bowman@cfmthschools.net

Add

×

Nick,

I am willing to be a reference for your boys and girls soccer program. I believe your teams would be very competitive at the Class A level. Do you think you would have enough participants to field JV and varsity teams?

I at first glance would say this would be a good thing for your soccer programs in Plains. I am seeking input from my coaching staff as well and will get back to you as soon as possible.

[See More from Nick Lawyer](#)

--

Yours in Sports,  
Troy Bowman LAT, ATC  
CFHS Activities Director  
Columbia Falls High School  
Columbia Falls, Montana  
[t\\_bowman@cfmthschools.net](mailto:t_bowman@cfmthschools.net)  
(406) 892-6500 ext. 5003  
(406) 892-6583 (FAX)

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Thomas Clark, I am the Girls Varsity Soccer Coach at Columbia Falls High School. I am writing this letter in conjunction with Mark [Galbraith](#) former Whitefish High School Goalkeeper Coach and head of Goalkeeping for Flathead Valley United. Both Mark and I want to highly recommend the consideration of a high school soccer program for Plains High School.

We both firmly believe that Plains High School can support a competitive varsity soccer program, considering the player pool of Clark Fork Soccer programs we have played against in the past. Additionally, in conversations with Nick Lawyer I feel that the Plains area has the infrastructure and leadership to take on a well-run soccer program. We both believe that adding an additional soccer program would be a good thing for the state of Montana, but most importantly a great thing for your young student athletes.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Best,

Thomas Clark  
Columbia Falls High School Girls Varsity Soccer Coach

Mark Galbraith  
Director of Goalkeeping Flathead Valley United

April 20, 2022

John Lacey  
Whitefish HS Boys Soccer Coach  
506 Kalispell Avenue  
Whitefish, MT 59937

Plains School Board & Administrators

Re: High School Soccer program  
*Clark Fork Soccer Recommendation*

Dear Leaders of the Plains School District,

I write now in support of the request by the Clark Fork Soccer club that the Plains School District officially take on and adopt high school soccer as an MHSA sport.

I have been the head boys soccer coach at Whitefish High (Class A) for the last seven seasons. Prior to that time, and continuing today, I have several decades of experience at the club and community level of Montana soccer. I have full confidence that now and moving forward, Clark Fork Soccer is primed for success as an MHSA program under the leadership of your school district.

First and foremost, the soccer foundation that has been built in your larger community by the Clark Fork Soccer club is remarkable and absolutely sound. Any high school program depends upon a vibrant and year-round youth program. On any given spring or fall weekend, I know and routinely witness numerous Clark Fork youth teams competing with and finding success against teams all around Montana and our interstate region. The quantity and the quality of Clark Fork players/soccer continues to grow. Investments in coaching and facilities are feeding that club growth, and there is no doubt that this cycle feeds itself and inspires more of the same. Adding MHSA-sanctioned soccer at the high school level will further boost that current and undeniable growth and enthusiasm in soccer/the club, as players and families, and indeed the larger community as a whole, all look forward to the special opportunities and community pride that distinctly comes from high school competition in Montana.

For many years, Whitefish High School (WHS) has hosted Clark Fork for one (or more) JV games; our varsity schedule is more strictly limited to include conference opponents, etc. Those games are regularly our JV team's most competitive and best matches. Based on those years of games, I would fully expect that Clark Fork's 'new' high school team would immediately compete well in Class A and indeed win games against several schools currently competing in MHSA Class A Soccer.

WHS's matches with Clark Fork over the years have also been highlights on our schedule because of the enthusiasm shown by Clark Fork supporters. Clark Fork coaches and players all likewise demonstrate great sportsmanship, respect for the game, and



indeed all the values that MHSA so regularly represents as its primary goals beyond simply competitive 'success.' You can and should already be proud of what 'your' soccer teams/high school students represent of your community.

I am particularly encouraged by and supportive of Clark Fork's effort to join the MHSA ranks *at this time*. Multiple new schools are in their first or second years with their official high school programs.<sup>1</sup> That growth is exciting for all of us in MHSA soccer. I further believe it offers great incentive and voice to other new programs, like in Plains, where the prospect of growing alongside, and finding success against, relative peers at a similar stage of development is therefore strong.

Finally, I will share that I strongly support official adoption of Clark Fork Soccer by the high school based upon the very real benefits I have witnessed for and within students and the high school community. Specifically, every summer a new batch of eighth-graders have the opportunity to train with and get to know their high school teammates before they ever step foot into the high school building as wide-eyed ninth-graders. The bonds already forged among older soccer teammates give them all a very real confidence and platform for success, from Day One, in literally all other aspects of their high school experience. Similarly, their place and pride as letter-winning *High School Athletes*, not just club participants competing on the relative fringes against other 'real' high school teams, empowers students to invest themselves as athletes and students in multiple other aspects of their high school experience. The ripple effect of endorsing those students/soccer players is real and truly pays an exponential reward within a high school community. I have witnessed this time and again, and I share these benefits here because, frankly, I did not appreciate these valuable impacts when I started as a high school coach almost eight years ago. They are worthy of your foremost consideration, and part of me regrets even here presenting them as an apparent afterthought.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my thoughts and letter of support. I wish you all the best, and look forward with hope of welcoming your community into the MHSA Class A Soccer realm. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.



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<sup>1</sup> For example, East Helena and Lockwood are new Class A schools in their second year of MHSA Class A soccer. Lone Peak is in its third season, I believe. Browning will be competing in MHSA Class A soccer for the first time this fall.

O'Brien Byrd  
830 1<sup>st</sup> Ave West  
Columbia Falls, MT 59912

To the Plains Public Schools School Board,

My name is O'Brien Byrd, head boys soccer coach at Columbia Falls High School. In working with Clark Fork Soccer Alliance as the Plains community soccer club over the years, I've recently been informed of the idea that Plains High School could possibly sponsor a soccer program. Columbia Falls HS was the first MHSA program in 2018, to agree to play an MYSA affiliated team as we were looking for more JV games to put on our schedule. I've been working closely with Nick Lawyer since in the fall to schedule games with our high school program as well as in the spring, with our local soccer clubs that are all affiliated with MYSA.

This is a very exciting prospect for many reasons and I'm sure I don't have to tell you that soccer is the fastest growing sport in Montana by far. In working with Clark Fork in these past five years, I have absolute zero doubt that a school sponsored MHSA soccer program at Plains HS would be an instant success. I've been very impressed at Clark Forks numbers and their ability to compete at the Class A level. They've played our JV teams for the last five seasons, and I'd have to say the last two seasons, they could have easily competed with our Varsity teams. Our varsity teams have been in the State Final for the last two years. They are well coached and the soccer club is incredibly organized. Plains could jump right into our Northern A conference and compete with all of the teams in it. (Polson, Libby, Columbia Falls, Bigfork, Whitefish)

Soccer has been school sponsored among Class AA & A schools for over 33 years in Montana. We just welcomed Lockwood HS in Billings, East Helena HS, and Lone Peak HS in Class A in just the last three years. They are talking about school sponsored soccer in Browning HS currently. Columbia Falls just adopted a fully funded soccer program at the junior high this past fall and currently they compete with the local club teams. The sport is exploding and it's no wonder why it's the most popular sport in the world.

I've coached high school soccer in Montana for over 20 years. We've been fortunate enough to be in the State Championship Game in 8 of the last 20 seasons. I know what it takes to build a program and develop a soccer culture in the community. This takes incredible hard work and dedication to the kids. I've had firsthand experience with the families, coaches, players, and club administrators of Clark Fork and there is zero doubt that they are putting in their work and passion towards this. One of my former players and team captains at CFHS is now an undefeated coach of an under 12 boys team for CFSA. This community is without a doubt ready for this new venture. In the end, we are here to provide more opportunities for our school district kids. You will be offering more opportunities for these kids in terms of sport and we all know how much athletics coupled with academics, plays such an important role in the development of our children.

Please count on me as a resource to answer any questions you may have.

Yours in sport,

O'Brien Byrd  
cfwildcatsoccer@gmail.com

To whom it may concern,

I am writing this letter today on behalf of Clark Fork Soccer in their pursuit of adding soccer to the athletic program of the Plains School District. As a high school soccer coach in Missoula, I believe that giving students more opportunities to connect with their school is an important part of the high school experience. Adding a high school soccer program to your district would greatly benefit those student-athletes who do not currently play a team sport, and open up opportunities for other students as a whole.

I have had some experience with Clark Fork Soccer over the last several years as they have strived to provide their young athletes with opportunities to play. Clark Fork Soccer, as a club team, reached out to me, asking if my high school team might have games to play. I just happen to have a freshman soccer team at Hellgate High School, and am always looking to find that team games throughout the season. I would say that we have had a nice partnership over the last three years, and my freshman team has been able to play the Clark Fork team several time each season.

The games that we have played against one another have been great for both sides. While my freshman team is typically the better side, having more opportunities to play in Missoula and develop their skills, Clark Fork always comes in ready to give us a good game. There are a number of strong athletes on that team, who no doubt would develop into better, technically sound players should they have the opportunity to play more. Adding a high school program, with more opportunities to train and play within MHSA Class A soccer would no doubt help them grow as players over the next several years.

As a long-time coach, I have coached and watched a lot of high school soccer over the years, and I believe that Clark Fork would do well within the class A level. Having seen class A play, there are a lot of different skill levels just within this league alone. While I do think Clark Fork might struggle at first against some of the perennial favorites in Class A soccer, I think they would be able to compete right away with the middle to bottom third of the league. However, there is also a good possibility that within a couple years of joining the league, they could be competing within the playoffs. I say this because it seems like there is a strong push to develop soccer within the Plains community, there is dedication among the coaches, and the youth soccer population is growing. Soccer still continues to be one of the faster growing sports in Montana, and even smaller, rural towns such as Plains can build competitive programs.

Please consider adding high school soccer to the Plains School District. I understand funding is always an issue within a school district, but feel it is well worth it to provide more opportunities to these young athletes. Please let me know if I can answer any further questions.

Sincerely,

Jay Anderson  
406-531-8802  
Boys' Soccer Coach - Hellgate High School  
6<sup>th</sup> Grade Teacher – Washington Middle School



# CASE STUDY: LONE PEAK HIGH SCHOOL

In the Fall of 2020 Lone Peak High School (a Class C school) added MHSAA Soccer as a school sport. That situation and decision was very similar to the situation now being considered:

- Lone Peak High School is a small school (111 students for the 2020-2021 season)
- They are competing against Class-A schools (Billings Central, Laurel, Lockwood, & Park High Schools)
- They have robust club Soccer community of similar size to Clark Fork Soccer Alliance
- Participation was also a concern (their inaugural teams had 13 boys and 12 girls)

Lone Peak High School Soccer has had quick success despite these challenges.

- First Season (2020) – Lone Peak boys finished 2-4-2, 3<sup>rd</sup> in the East. They made the playoffs and lost in the quarter-finals. Lone Peak Girls finished 0-7-0, 4<sup>th</sup> in the East and did not make the playoffs
- Second Season (2021) – Lone Peak boys finished 6-7-1 and 3<sup>rd</sup> in the East. They beat the much larger Billings Central High School team in their first playoff game and lost in the quarter-finals to state runners-up Columbia Falls. Lone Peak Girls finished 3-9-1, 4<sup>th</sup> in the East and did not make the Playoffs

We believe that Lone Peak High School shows that a small school can add Soccer and not only succeed but can thrive. For Plains High School we believe this demonstrates that this proposal is viable for our school district.

Here is a news article from fall of 2020 detailing the decision:

## With Big Sky booming, Class C Lone Peak set to kick off inaugural soccer seasons



By: Slim Kimmel

Posted at 3:04 PM, Sep 10, 2020



GALLATIN GATEWAY — It's hard enough to add new high school sports programs under normal circumstances.

But it's especially challenging to launch new programs during a pandemic, as the coaches and administrators have learned at Lone Peak High School in the mountain resort community of Big Sky.

The Big Horns are set to kick off their inaugural Montana High School Association-sanctioned boys and girls soccer seasons this Saturday. But they won't even be able to don their school uniforms, which haven't yet arrived due to delivery complications stemming from both the coronavirus pandemic and Hurricane Laura.

"We have a solid backup plan," said Tony Coppola, Lone Peak's head boys soccer coach and one of the key figures behind adding the programs to the school's athletic offerings. "The (Big Sky Football Club) that most of the team plays or played for has jerseys for us to use."

The Big Sky Football Club (BSFC) helped spark Big Sky's burgeoning soccer interest. The traveling program started in 2018 and has continued to grow as the Big Sky community has continued to grow. The high school currently has approximately 115 students, placing it in Class C, but enrollment is projected to increase to a Class B level within the next few years. Meanwhile, nearly 200 kids, kindergarten through 12th grade, played under the BSFC umbrella last fall, which is creating a great feeder program for the high school teams.

"We kind of struck while the iron was hot," Coppola said. "With the formation of the Big Sky Football Club coupled with a lot of community interest, we lobbied for it. There was a lot of community members that came together. Lots of parents donated money and were able to put that money toward seed money to get the program up and running."

"It's a reality now, so it's really exciting," he added. "It's been a long time coming. Since we were a Class C school, the logistics of making it a high school program took a little bit longer than expected."

As the lone Class C school playing high school soccer in Montana, Lone Peak will compete at the Class A level this fall, joining Billings Central, Laurel and Livingston in the Eastern A. Billings Central's enrollment last spring was listed at 319 students, Laurel's at 613 and Livingston's at 408.

Prior to this season, Class B Missoula Loyola was the smallest Montana school to offer soccer with 156 students last fall.

"We understand it will be a challenge to play schools who have these larger programs and a larger student population," said Lone Peak athletic director John Hannahs. "But this is where the program is going to start, and hopefully it just keeps growing as the years pass on."

Hannahs predicted that Lone Peak, which only opened its doors in 2009, would climb to Class B for the rest of its programs by 2022, citing recent numbers as evidence. Lone Peak graduated 21 seniors in the spring and welcomed 35 freshmen this fall.

Earlier this year, voters in the Big Sky School District passed a bond to expand facilities, which will include a new artificial turf for football and soccer games in the future. For now, the Big Horns will play their soccer matches at the Big Sky Community Park. That starts Saturday with a doubleheader against Livingston in what will be the season openers for both schools. The boys will play at noon and the girls at 2 p.m.

"It's just such a weird time to start a soccer program with all the limitations of COVID. I mean, our first six games have been canceled because of it," Coppola said. "We just want to get the program off the ground, I think we've done that. We want to be able to play some games and compete. We'd love to win some games, right? I've got some really skilled players and so does the women's coach, Jaci Clack, but at the end of the day, just try to get a program that's going to be sustainable up and off the ground."

The boys have 13 players on the team, including five seniors, three of which have aspirations of playing college soccer, according to Coppola. Seniors Evan Iskenderian and Michael Romney will serve as the boys captains.

There are 12 players on the girls team, with senior Sara Wilson and junior Sophia Cone leading that group as captains.

Lone Peak also offers football and volleyball in the fall, boys and girls basketball in the winter, and golf, tennis and track and field in the spring. Of course, many athletes in the area have grown up around outdoor recreation, specifically skiing, which Coppola said lends itself well to developing soccer players.

"I feel kind of like the body type of the skier or the outdoor kind of adventure enthusiast kind of serves itself to soccer, right? They're athletic, they're fast, they're obviously in good shape," Coppola said.

"Big Sky has caught the soccer bug in a major way."