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**Nick  
Martin**

[Telling Tales Out of School](#)

## January 17, 2008

### The reality of school sports.....

Filed under: [Uncategorized](#) — Nick Martin @ 1:39 pm

We've been unable to get that unspeakable tragedy in New Brunswick out of our minds.

When school and club sports have been an intrinsic part of our entire family's life for so many years, when your younger kid continues to travel for sports, almost entirely by mini-van or car, with parents or teachers or fellow teens at the wheel.....

Education Minister Peter Bjornson told me Tuesday that the province could order schools to travel exclusively to extracurricular activities by school bus. Student safety is foremost, said Bjornson, and no one is going to dispute that.

There are huge implications for student activities if the Doer government takes that step.

I was talking to an engineer, and he said that as far as safety goes, he'd rather have his kids in a van with seat belts. That's for people with technical knowledge and expertise to figure out.

School buses are expensive to operate. While buses and drivers may be available for weekend tournaments, most school sports are played right after school, when buses and drivers are fully occupied taking kids home from school. In the country, that may mean the

buses and drivers aren't back at the bus barn and available again before 5:30 p.m., maybe 6 p.m.

School sports are played right after school, but if Bjornson goes ahead with the ban on private vehicle travel, it's logical that school sports would be pushed back into the early evening — when kids have part-time jobs, when community sports are held to avoid conflicts with school sports, when they're doing homework. And that's a really long day for bus drivers.

I've been trying to remember when my kids have had a school bus for school sports. I think back in elementary school, they had a bus to take them to Assiniboine Park for the annual 2-k Fit Run. High school, I think they shared a bus with at least one other school each year to go to provincial cross country at the ski area the other side of Carman.

Otherwise, it's pretty much private vehicle.

Grade 7, cross country was by Winnipeg Transit, unless parents could get off in time to drive. The kids would miss last period, the teacher/coach would tell them which bus(es) to take to Kildonan Park or Churchill Drive or the stormwater pond just off 90 and Selkirk. We'd get there in time to watch them run, and then drive them home.

Kids in grades 9 to 12 run cross country on a different day, so schools rely pretty much on teachers driving, or the older kids with licences getting a car.

When the varsity basketball team went to Saskatoon, the school rented vans and the coaches drove. Last spring, a teacher drove her own car to provincial badminton in Gimli. My son took a load in our van to provincial badminton in Portage la Prairie three years ago. I drove the van to provincial volleyball in Killarney, coming back on dark country roads with snow falling steadily.

School sports are all pretty much private vehicle. Back in Grade 12, maybe it happened in Grade 11 as well, we'd often have to figure out which of us would not have a vehicle to get to work the next day, because the volleyball/basketball/soccer/badminton/track coach had told our son that he/she needed players with licences and vans to drive the team to away games.

What happens in practical terms if Bjornson orders schools to use school buses exclusively? Will there be documents filed to show that a school used a bus for an away game? Will someone be policing it, and if so who? What if you have a varsity game involving grades 11 and 12, kids with driver's licences, some already turned 18, Westwood at St. James, River East at Miles Mac, Kelvin at Grant Park, Crocus Plains at Neelin — will someone have to check that no one took a private vehicle those few blocks?

Keith Thomas, the risk manager for the Manitoba Association of School Trsutees, says that schools have forms for volunteer parent drivers. The principal is supposed to check your licence to make sure it's valid, and the principal is supposed to have a look at the condition of all vehicles being used to drive students to away games.

In the eight years we've been driving kids at our high school, I only recall having my licence photocopied before I drove members of the Grade 9 girls volleyball team to Killarney. Sure, the teachers knew my wife and me, and so did the principal, but I can't remember another occasion when anyone checked if I still had a valid licence or had a look at the condition of my vehicle. We've

driven students all over the city, we've been to Portage la Prairie, Lorette, Selkirk. In the real world, principals don't have that kind of time. The same small group of parents generally drive year after year, and the school puts trust in us.

In the country, taking a transit bus, or even walking, to an away game just doesn't happen. Every high school game involves one school going out of town, sometimes half an hour away, sometimes two hours each way on two-lane roads, most of the sports happening in winter.

Club soccer and volleyball, it's pretty much all private vehicle, every game, every tournament, every practice. Minneapolis and Saskatoon, or just across the city, it's private vehicle. I know, Bjornson's not addressing that, I'm saying it's a reality of life. The club volleyball teams shared a bus to Calgary last May, the provincial soccer team had a bus, the university volleyball team travels by bus, but 99 per cent of your kids playing sports is driving your own car or van.

I'd been thinking for a while of blogging about rides, but that was going to be petty whining about parents who can share driving but don't, or who send their kid to Regina with you but don't chip in for gas.

This tragedy has a lot of people thinking and worrying. We've got a whole club volleyball season ahead of us, and the girls are going to be going on the road a lot. We still have a year and a half of varsity sports ahead of us, and almost none of it was planned with school buses as the mode of travel.

Bjornson said he isn't going to waste any time before examining student safety, and no one wants him to delay a second. But if he decides that school buses are the safest and only way that kids can take part in school sports, there's going to be a huge change in the way high school sports operate.

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