

Safety and Risk in Sports Facilities

While ASTM International provides voluntary consensus standards for many products used in sports facilities and the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) offers standards for playgrounds, there is no regulatory agency or inspection process in place for sports courts and fields, leaving facility managers and users to manage risk on their own. The burden of improving safety often falls to officials, coaches, and parents, yet most injuries occur during practices and unsupervised play. Facility managers can be proactive in preventing injuries and limiting liability by acting on the suggestions below and consulting with their insurance company.

- 1 KNOW THE FACTS** According to the most recent data from the CPSC regarding sports and recreational equipment injuries, basketball is responsible for an estimated 536,840 injuries annually, nearly twice the number as from playground equipment. Football-related injuries were estimated to be 467,731, and soccer at 214,053. Volleyball and hockey each account for about 60,000 injuries per year, while the lacrosse, rugby, and miscellaneous ball games grouping accounted for nearly 90,000.
- 2 INSPECTION** Keeping a log of inspection dates and problems identified is important for safety and liability reasons. Look for frayed cables, loose bolts, weak welds, rough edges, or any excessive wear and tear and bring any concerns to the facility owner's attention and follow up on suggestions.
- 3 SAFETY PADDING** With active play comes the risk for head and limb injuries from hard or sharp surfaces. Invest in wall and stage padding and make sure the padding on all sports equipment, scorers tables, and bleachers is in good condition and properly installed.
- 4 EQUIPMENT STORAGE** Many sports injuries occur during practice and, often, players are responsible for equipment setup. All balls should be safely off the floor in a cart or bag and larger equipment should be properly stored in specially-designed transport carts or attached to the wall. Safe lifting techniques as well as set up and tear down training should be provided for everyone.
- 5 BASKETBALL** Ceiling and wall suspended structures should have a "seatbelt" added in case of equipment failure and portable systems must have ballast installed properly. Padding on all surfaces subject to player contact should be replaced every ten years or more often if damaged.
- 6 VOLLEYBALL** Most volleyball standards are heavy and awkward to carry and install in sockets. Consider replacement with competition-quality portables or lighter weight materials to improve safety. Purchase wall brackets or carts to reduce the risk of injury during storage and transport.
- 7 SOCCER** Fields must be level and free from obstruction for each practice and game. Goals should be commercially manufactured according to ASTM standards and must be installed with the proper ballast and anchors for the goal design. Most tip-over injuries occur during non-game times, so proper storage procedures, including net removal, are critical.
- 8 FOOTBALL** To prevent injuries to spectators, bleachers should be labeled for safety concerns such as pinch points or sharp edges. Bleachers are subject to regulations by various local and state agencies and older bleachers should be updated or replaced if not in compliance. On the field, goalpost padding is replaced frequently but goalposts often just require finish maintenance.
- 9 EQUIPMENT AGE** Generally speaking, commercially manufactured sports equipment is built to last, but the intensity of play and the popularity of unsupervised play is increasing the expected stress on equipment. Visually inspecting the static equipment may not be enough to identify serious safety risks, so observing the equipment in use is advised. New equipment may be indicated if older equipment may not meet current standards or activity levels.
- 10 REACH OUT** Sports equipment manufacturers have product design engineers that, in many cases, are continuously improving products based on customer feedback so give them a call if you have any safety concerns. Also, keep a copy of all installation instructions on file and review them for installation tips and maintenance schedules, contacting the manufacturer with any questions.