What a Safety Audit Can Do for You

By Floyd Perry and Steve Guise

Though sports turf and sports-facility managers now are more concerned with designing and operating safe facilities and programs than ever before, it’s impossible to prevent all injuries. In today’s litigious society “covering your bases” is essential.

The most important aspect of field maintenance within this litigious environment is safety, both the users’ and your own. When problems, such as a bad ball hop, do occur, it’s not enough to say, “See my lawyer.” The field must be properly maintained to protect users from injury and to protect field owners and operators from frivolous lawsuits.

The three key words are prudent, reasonable and consistent. If groundskeepers are prudent and reasonable in their maintenance — even if they don’t have the most extensive equipment and supplies — if they do the best they can with what they’ve got, and they do it in a consistent manner, then they may be free of liability.

Many field operators often run a Monday-Wednesday-Friday maintenance schedule, meaning that Tuesday’s game may be played on a field that has ruts and holes. If an accident takes place, you haven’t been prudent and reasonable.

If a case is brought under such circumstances, it will be settled out of court because the field owners know they are wrong. If an injured player takes some pictures of the facility, and there are holes in the playing field, that’s strong evidence of negligence.

If, on the other hand, the field is in top condition, and the team has the foresight to take pictures of the field right after the accident and has at least two eyewitnesses immediately file reports, the facility should be able to claim, “We are not liable. Our field care is consistent, and we did everything that was prudent and reasonable.”

A workable program of safety audits and risk-management practices coupled with management and maintenance practices to get and keep facilities in the best possible conditions will help prevent injuries — and the resulting litigation.

If you don’t look for problems, you probably won’t see them. Changes may be harder to spot when you see the facilities on a day-to-day basis. That’s why a formal safety-audit system can prove beneficial.

A safety audit protects your company, players, workers and patrons. Remember, no one segment of this group is more important than the other segments. You will assume some degree of liability if you know of a problem and do not rectify it or at least demonstrate a reasonable desire to address and rectify it.

Include Utility Companies

A safety audit assesses not only field conditions but structural issues, including utilities — the electrical, water and gas lines into and within the facility. Local utility companies should be contacted and should be responsible for conducting a safety audit on all mainlines into the facility on an annual basis. This should include such things as the integrity of the pipes or lines themselves, their ability to handle the volume of water, gas or electricity, the placement of wires and pipes, and the integrity of connections. For water systems, the integrity and efficiency of backflow valves should also be checked.

Structural audits include assessing the overall integrity of the basic structure and the exterior and interior space. How safe are your offices, storage rooms, restrooms, parking lots, walkways, fencing, field lighting, and dugouts? Audits include the big things, like the structural integrity of buildings, and the little — but also potentially dangerous — things, like the number of connections at an electrical outlet, the placement of electrical cords and the condition of the water heater.

Having an outside firm perform a safety audit puts more clout in the audit results. Though the information relayed may confirm what you have been saying, the external knowledge of the problem makes it a known factor that cannot be avoided.

Obviously, field conditions are a major focus of the safety audit. One area of concern is solid structures within the playing area. For example, the constant infiltration of skinned-area clay into the grass in front of the pitcher’s mound and around home plate has led some turf managers to place artificial turf on top
of an asphalt or concrete base in these spots. Though these areas may seem easier to maintain, they can increase the risk of injury to players. The surfaces are less forgiving than soil and natural grass. Also, if a drain and drain cover are needed within these hard structures to permit proper drainage, a player's cleat could slip into the drain cover.

Improperly constructed, damaged or loose fencing all have potential for injury to players and spectators. A foul ball can fly through a loose strip of fencing and injure a spectator. A player can be hurt by coming in contact with fence poles placed on the inside of a fence or with barbs improperly installed at the top, rather than the bottom, of the fence.

The field itself — the evenness and relative softness and hardness of the playing surface — will be audited. Auditors will be looking for obvious unplayable conditions such as holes, ruts and rocks, but also for inconsistencies in the surface. All athletes — thoroughbred horses, baseball, soccer and football players — compete based on the field conditions, gauging their moves on the amount of available traction and the relative softness or hardness of the surface. An inconsistency — a soft spot, a hard spot, more or less traction — may cause the athlete to exert an inappropriate degree of force and, thus, sustain an injury. The extent of turf cover — cushioning and traction — will be evaluated.

**Develop Safety Audit Committee**

Don't stop the safety process with a one-time audit. Develop an inter-facility safety audit committee. Individuals involved with different areas of the facility should participate in the safety audit committee. Include financial decision-makers in the group, so they will be sure to understand the problems and help in setting priorities from the financial aspect.

The group can develop an audit sheet for the facility that will be used quarterly to spot wear and tear, turning up potential problems that might otherwise appear down the line. The group should review the safety audit to develop a checklist of concerns, then discuss these concerns and decide how to resolve them.

Install a reminder system to ensure that quarterly safety audits are carried out. Use a calendar or computer tickler system, whatever it takes to ensure compliance.

Safety is an ongoing concern and requires the cooperation of all parties. Once a facility is proactive in safety auditing, that facility must be proactive in maintenance to be sure no problems are developing.

Design a daily checklist that maintenance personnel can use. Once an employee registers a concern on the daily audit checklist, that concern must be addressed and resolved.

Everyone has to take responsibility for resolving problems. If a field crew employee reports a problem, he or she has the responsibility to follow up to make sure action is taken. Each staff member becomes part of the solution.

Interim actions show awareness of a problem and willingness to rectify that problem. For example, posting warning signs to steer foot traffic away from an unsafe walkway are temporary measures to avoid injury until more permanent solutions can be made.

Some problems are temporary and warrant only temporary solutions, such as signs posted to denote a wet floor.
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that may be slippery right after main-
tenance personnel have scrubbed it.

Products that make it easier to main-
tain facilities in a safe manner must
be considered. Someone connected with
risk management for the facility should
be involved in field design. Fields that
are safer by design are also cost-
effective. The cost to players in terms of
their longevity in the game is a loss
that can be measured in both financial
and personal terms.

Systems that improve field condi-
tions may be more expensive to install
initially but create a long-term, highly
usable playing surface that is safer for
the athletes. Consider the effectiveness
of sand-based field construction sys-
tems employing USGA specifications.
Consider a system that gives a uniform
consistency to the rootzone media, such
as the Netlon Advanced Turf System,
which improves field drainage, relieves
compaction and reduces surface impact
resistance, giving athletes a playable
arena that is stable, yet not too hard,
with more consistent turf develop-
ment and increased traction in
unfavorable conditions.

Consider the improvements made in
baseball fields because of the inherent
problems with clay surfaces. Skinned-area
clay surfaces now are being mixed and
maintained to reduce the hardness of the
infield. Sand, calcined clay and other
additives are widely used to help smooth
hard bumps and prevent spikes from
leaving pick marks and divots.

Bring coaches into the field
construction and maintenance equa-
tion. Coaches, from the high school to the
professional level, know what an
individual player’s contribution can be
to his team and can visualize that
contribution to the game throughout
the player’s career. The industry must
deal with engineering and design that
extends the active careers of players
and their long-term contribution to
their game. Just listen to what players
have to say. (See the NFL Players
Association sidebar below.)

Prepare for Worst-Case Scenario

Despite your best construction
methods and maintenance practices,
injuries can occur. Prepare your
facility to deal with the “worst-
case” scenario.

Develop a plan of action in the event
that injuries occur. Establish a review
committee made up of the audit coor-
dinator, a few of the people who serve on
the audit committee, some members of
the financial group and representatives
from all other segments of the facility.
This safety committee will serve as the
risk-management arm of the facility,
reviewing the process of rectifying
concerns addressed by the safety audit
committee and forming a unified action
committee in the case of injury or
litigation. In time, the facility may wish
to hire a risk-management specialist.

Of the potentially dangerous areas on
a field, the playing surface has come
under the most scrutiny by lawyers.
Many lawyers know of no such thing as
a bad hop. Instead, poor construction
or poor maintenance procedures are blamed
for injuries.

Even if your actions are prudent,
reasonable and consistent, do not assume
you will have the opportunity to defend
yourself in court in a liability situation.
Studies indicate that more than 95
percent of all personal injury lawsuits are
settled by insurance companies prior
the trial. Will the facility face greater
financial risk with the added court
costs and potential settlement should the
verdict be in favor of the plaintiff? Third,
settlement is the “expected” system of
dispute resolution. Does the attorney
for the insurance company have a
reasonable expectation of reaching a
settlement with a plaintiff who appears
to be willing to compromise?

Strong facility safety programs
significantly reduce liability exposure.
Remember, liability litigation is not
automatically settled in favor of the
plaintiff. A system of safety audits and
rectification of concerns combined with
intelligent field construction methods and
proper maintenance procedures, all
practiced remembering the three key
words — prudent, reasonable and
consistent — can cover your bases.

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NFL Players Prefer Natural Grass

The National Football League Players Association recently announced
the results of a league-wide player survey concerning NFL playing sur-
faces. The written survey, which was directed by the Board of Player
Representatives at its March 1994 meeting, was conducted by NFLPA
staff members at team meetings during the 1994 season. The players
were asked a series of 13 questions concerning their preferences in field
surfaces. The survey revealed that 85 percent of the 965 players who
answered preferred to play on natural grass, seven percent preferred arti-
ficial turf and eight percent had no preference. Seventy percent of the
players also indicated that playing on a natural grass surface was either
very important or somewhat important in selecting the teams they
would consider signing with as free agents.

Other results of the survey:
• 93 percent of NFL players believe that artificial turf is more likely
than grass to contribute to injury.
• 96 percent believe artificial turf causes more soreness.
• 91 percent believe artificial turf is more likely to shorten their
careers.
• 90 percent believe artificial turf is more likely to worsen their qual-
ity of life after football.
• 54 percent identified an artificial turf injury they suffered that they
believe would not have happened on grass.

The NFLPA has asked the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to
conduct an epidemiological study of grass and artificial turf injuries. The
National Center for Injury Protection and Control, which is part of CDC,
will work in conjunction with the National Institute of Occupational
Safety and Health (NIOSH) on the project.