How Safe Are Your Fields?

What a Safety Audit Can Do for You

Field construction, maintenance and safety were key topics as STMA members toured McKechnie Field at the 1995 STMA meeting last February in Bradenton, FL.

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, coning off and 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 maintenance personnel have scrubbed it.

Products that make it easier to maintain 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 conditions 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 systems 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 development 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 equation. 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 coordinator, 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 to trial.

According to a survey conducted by Gary R. Gray, Ed.D, an assistant professor of physical education and leisure studies at Iowa State University, the main factors that influence the decisions of insurance company attorneys on whether to take a case to court fall into three general categories. The first is the uncertainty or risk of a trial. Given the quality of the factual evidence, witnesses and attorneys, the degree of preparation of the plaintiff's attorney and the degree of clear-cut liability, how solid is the facility's position? Second, consider the cost of a trial versus settlement. Will the facility face greater financial exposure 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 surfaces. 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 artificial 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 quality 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.