

Signage: Your First Line of Defense

By Floyd Perry

For a baseball team to be successful, it must have strong pitching and a solid, middle-of-the-diamond defense. A football team needs to have a flexible defensive scheme and strong defensive personnel. A basketball team many times can become outstanding with pesky guards and an intimidating center.

What's the sports turf manager or groundskeeper's first line of defense on his property? In my observation, it's *signage*! Let me continue with my reasoning so you don't become confused. In today's "sue me — sue you" society, every one of us is vulnerable to potential lawsuits every time paying or non-paying patrons enter our stadiums, use our fields or view our games.

How is the sports manager the first line of defense in his sports facilities? Along with maintaining the turf areas, the clay portions, the common areas, many times the bleachers and parking lots, there needs to be developed a strong, preventive program of consumer signage and public address announcements that place the patron on alert to potential dangers along with institutional rules and regulations.

In 1989, at Boardwalk and Baseball, our baseball staff and Ed Mangan's ground crew orchestrated more than 1,250 games in 265 days. These games were part of the professional, amateur and recreational agenda. That's a lot of games for a six-field private complex. It was accomplished by a professional, safety-minded grounds staff and was extremely successful. Did we have paying patrons hit with baseballs? Did we have people go to the emergency room? Did we have people sue?

Of course, the answer is "yes." The question that hasn't been answered, though, is: "Was anyone successful in their lawsuit?" That answer is "no."

The company did not have a single claim that went to court or was settled by a mediator out of court. The primary reason was a strong defense in signage.



Signs alert facility users of risks and rules.

The courts will tell you that everyone assumes some degree of risk when playing or viewing an athletic contest. But that risk must be explained and qualified by the host site through quality care and maintenance of the total facility and with the availability of first-aid and immediate second aid to the patron.

The first phase of defense (signage and announcements) must be implemented and in place to have a solid, well-fortified sports arena. Many patrons do not read signs or cannot relate to the English language (international visitors), so many times symbols are required. Many patrons are too busy with the viewing of the event, and onetime announcements on safety are not sufficient, so it must be repeated throughout the contest. Many patrons when they pay their 25 cents feel that they own the facility and can do or go wherever they please. That's also where signage and announcements assist with access control and security.

The job ramifications and responsibilities of the solid manager or groundskeeper are widening daily. Many times new responsibilities meet with

anger and displeasure since time is already short. Please avoid letting this one small part of the job get to you. Your strongest line of defense is being proactive safety rather than reactive after the lawsuit is filed. My comments to managers and groundskeepers at my seminars is to put their requests in writing and take pictures of their strongest concerns and run it up the flagpole. It's better to solve a \$2,500 problem than face a \$2.5 million lawsuit.

What saves the managers from aggravation and discomfort from accidents and injuries on their property? What can the parks, fields, stadiums, schools and colleges do to create their solid line of defense? *Signage*! It works! □

Editor's note: Floyd Perry is a current member of STMA and PGMS and travels around the country to coordinate workshops and seminars on grounds maintenance and facility improvement. He has authored the textbook A Pictorial Guide to Quality Groundskeeping and created two videos, The ABC's for Grounds Maintenance, for baseball and softball fields.