

# Don't overlook your backstops

BY JIM MYRLAND

Rarely does anyone stop to think about the importance of a backstop structure on an athletic field. Quite often they are taken for granted and overlooked as simply being a part of the surrounding facility with no real impact on the game itself. But it is logical to believe that because of their importance to the game, backstop structures were invented within hours, if not minutes, of the first organized baseball game ever played. The time wasted running after every errant pitch and foul ball that passed the plate, not to mention the safety of curious bystanders and spectators made the use of these structures a necessity to facilitate a timely and enjoyable event.

Today backstops are as much a part of baseball and softball fields as the bases and home plate, but they are rapidly gaining popularity in other sports such as soccer, field hockey, and lacrosse as well. They come in many sizes, shapes, and styles to reflect the various needs of any particular game. Regardless of the sport however, their purpose is always the same—to protect people and property in the area behind the goal or home plate while improving the playability of the field by keeping the ball near the action.

A backstop is most effective when it is located relatively close to, but not infringing on, the field of play. For example, baseball and softball backstops must be located far enough back from the plate and base lines in case a reasonable play can be made on a ball in foul territory. If they are located too close to or overhanging the plate, they may interfere with a foul ball that would normally be playable.

In other field sports such as soccer, the backstop structure may be placed immediately behind the goal if desired since out-of-bounds territory does not affect play. Of course attention must be given to placing any support structure to minimize the danger of collision with a player running out-of-bounds. If the backstop is moved further from the field of play to avoid collisions, it must be made larger to compensate for the distance if it's to remain effective. This trade-off between safety and playability controls the design and placement of the backstop structure.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

## Three baseball designs

There are basically three common backstop designs used for baseball and softball. The most popular is a three-sided chain link structure. Large diameter anchor poles support cross bars and chain link fabric to create a wall that runs behind the plate and some distance down each foul line. Sizes can vary from a simple set of three 10 x 10-ft. panels to a structure 30 ft. high and more than 100 ft. wide. Chain link backstops can also be made with a cantilevered or over-hanging section that projects up and out over the home plate area.

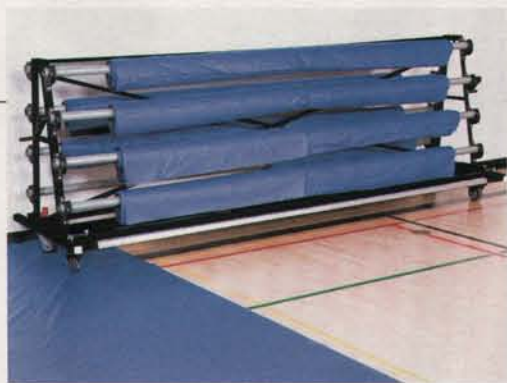
The second backstop style is the "clam shell." These are somewhat less common since they are made with shaped support frames and chain link fabric panels. Since only a few suppliers manufacture them, the cost of freight and installation to your location may be relatively high. Most fence contractors on the other hand, can build the three-panel structures on-site using standard fencing materials.

The third backstop design used for baseball and softball uses netting material instead of chain link fabric. Netting is less expensive, lighter weight, and more easily fit to odd shapes or forms than chain link, not to mention easier for spectators to see through. These structures are often made using support poles or cables, protective netting, and a solid base wall. Typically backstops of this nature are built into stadiums or enclosed facilities where spectator safety and visibility are important issues. Figure 1 shows an NCAA Division 1 women's softball complex. This installation includes vertical nets hung behind home plate and down each foul line, along with an angled net running from the top edge of the backstop to the press box to protect the entire spectator seating area.

The solid wall at the base of the backstop can be made from wood or concrete. The surface should be padded to not only protect players from collisions but also deaden the

rebound of any ball that may impact the area. Padding can also be attached to a chain link structure in a similar manner to achieve the same results.

Hybrids of these designs in which both fencing and netting materials are used may



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also be used to extend a standard chain link backstop. This allows for more complete coverage of large seating areas, concession stands, playgrounds, buildings, or parking lots immediately adjacent to a field. In many cases, with only minor additions to an existing support structure, the lower cost and lighter weight netting materials allow significant coverage at a more reasonable price.

Vertical netting panels can be permanently installed using either extensions to the main backstop anchor poles or additional support poles located adjacent to the backstop. Nets can also be cut to fit around a backstop over-hang (Figure 2), or a lightweight over-hang can be made using netting and cantilevered support poles (Figure 3).

Some net installations must be designed for convenient raising and lowering of the net much like the extra point nets behind a football goal post. When this is necessary, a flexible cable can be added to the top edge of the net panels and a pulley system arranged so that the net goes up and comes down in a controlled manner.

The major cost factor in a netting-based backstop extension is generally the additional support structure required. Wooden utility poles or heavy-welded steel poles may be necessary depending on the height and length of the installation. However, it may be possible to use an existing building or utility pole for support to minimize cost. If an existing structure is to be considered for this purpose, the manufacturer or contractor that installed it should be consulted to determine whether it could support the surprisingly large wind load produced by a netting material.

When designing a backstop structure for your facility, regardless of what sport it is for, keep in mind it is there to protect people and property while facilitating a more enjoyable game for both spectators and players. **ST**

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