

By Mary Helen Sprecher



» **Far Left:** THE COTTING SCHOOL, located in Massachusetts, has a fully handicap-accessible field for the use of its students. Photos courtesy of Elizabeth Campbell Peters, The Cotting School

» **Left:** CHILDREN PLAY on the artificial turf field at The Cotting School. Most children are classified as medically fragile which impacted decisions regarding design and construction of the field, as well as materials.

» **Bottom Left:** THE COTTING SCHOOL FIELD measures 100 x 125 feet and allows students to participate in sporting events just as their able-bodied counterparts do.

GROWING NEED

According to industry insiders, it all starts with understanding the needs of the athletes and to understanding how much that need is growing. And make no mistake about it: adapted sports programs are on the rise.

“There are many fields being built for children with challenges,” says Daniel Wright, an STMA member with Sport Turf Company in Whitesburg, GA. “In our area, it is mainly baseball fields constructed with a rubber surface where wheelchairs can roll without difficulty. There are a number of these in the Atlanta area and they have established a Challenger Baseball League. From what I know, those fields are used a lot.”

In its most recent High School Athletics Participation Survey, the National Federation of State High School Associations found that adapted sports currently being offered to students with physical challenges included basketball, bowling, floor hockey, soccer, softball and track.

The American Association of Adapted Sports Programs, which works in partnership with educational agencies across the US to establish programs, policies, rules, regulations and more for students with physical disabilities, has also compiled its own list of sports, which include many of the above, as well as wheelchair handball, wheelchair football and beep baseball (played on a flat grassy surface by students with visual impairments). Move up to the rank of elite athletes and you’ll find the Paralympic Games, where a wide range of sports (summer and winter, indoors and outdoors) are contested.

But all those athletes had to start somewhere, and most likely, they started on the playgrounds and playing fields of their local schools. And while the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) certainly plays a part in the design of many facilities, its work can only do so much to help ath-

Creating a level playing field for all athletes

WHAT’S SEPARATING THE KID in a wheelchair from his or her able-bodied peers who are playing sports? It might be a lot more than the sidelines of the field.

It might be things many people don’t notice: a gate that is just a bit too narrow to get a wheelchair through or a field that is too muddy and uneven for a child who uses a wheelchair or a walker to feel safe. It might be furnishings or benches that an athlete can’t get past easily. It might even be a field that lacks just a few accommodations that turn it from being merely usable into an arena that allows the athlete to develop, and to compete with, his or her skills.

The good news, however, is that mak-

ing an athletic field more accessible doesn’t have to mean making drastic changes. Designers of athletic facilities, sports contractors and suppliers of materials have all worked with individual facilities to help break down the barriers and make athletic programs more available to all. Changes, large and small, can be implemented by acting now.

And that’s the most important thing to do: act now. Don’t wait for a student who is wheelchair-bound (or otherwise mobility-impaired) to request special accommodations. Being proactive can mean the difference between an athlete who becomes an enthusiastic participant, and one who goes away disappointed. (And in today’s litigious society, the latter scenario is never a good thing).


letes with physical challenges. That's why it's up to those who help build and manage fields to do their part to help break down those barriers.

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD (REALLY)

Sometimes, the needs of individuals with mobility impairments are overlooked because they're a small percentage of the population. That was not the case in the Cotting School in Lexington, MA. The school is specifically for students with special needs. Of its approximately 120 students, 40% have wheelchairs or walkers, according to president David Manzo.

"We have a fully accessible campus of 14 acres, but when I arrived, we had one hurdle left: how do you get kids in wheelchairs and walkers to play outside on a sports field? We have children in all kinds of wheelchairs, including some power chairs, which are really heavy. It just can't be done without a synthetic surface."

Cotting worked with Boston-based athletic facility designer Stantec Sport, which studied the students' needs and came up with a game plan for a field that would work.



We settled on a surface that utilized a shorter carpet pile (to keep it standing upright) and filled it up much higher in the pile. This enabled much easier wheelchair access.

"Our response was to test a number of different types of synthetic turf, which is accessible," said Stantec's Patrick Maguire, also an STMA member. "Grass is not. We settled on a surface that utilized a shorter carpet pile (to keep it standing upright) and filled it up much higher in the pile. This enabled much easier wheelchair access. We also made sure to remove all latex and rubber from the carpet and the infill. Instead of latex backing we used urethane and instead of crumb rubber we used thermoplastic elastomer (TPE)."

Polytan USA of Marietta, GA was one of the suppliers who contributed to the project. Athletic facility contractor RAD Sports of Rockland, MA did the construction. The finished field opened in September 2009 with an all-school soccer game. And that was just the beginning.

"We've been able to do Saturday morning soccer programs, so that children can play soccer on the field. These are things their typically developing peers are doing," says Manzo. "Parents, grandparents, everyone, comes out and watches the kids play."

Manzo is pleased with the field which allows wheelchairs to roll easily, but still protects children who fall. The students are all medically fragile, he notes, so accidents on the playing field are a big concern. The field measures 100 x 125 feet which, as he notes, might be modest to some schools, "but for us, it's perfect."

Sometimes, the lessons from someone in a different sport can help field managers understand their own facility better. Jeremiah Yolkut, who works with the United States Tennis Association, says that in

wheelchair tennis, it's the actual entryway onto the court that can give players trouble.

"While it's standard for many facilities to have 42-inch wide gates, you want to have a wider opening for players in wheelchairs because of what we call the camber, or the angle in the wheels that you'll see in an athletic wheelchair," says Yolkut. "You're much more likely to go to a 48-inch wide opening because that means you don't have to take a wheel off the chair to get it through the gate."

While not all players are self-conscious about having to get out of a wheelchair and 'scoot through' any gates, then reassemble the chair inside (or have it passed over the fence to them), most would rather have one less barrier. Amenities and accessories on the sidelines of the field, including team benches, seating for statisticians or scorekeepers, etc., should be chosen with the athletes in mind. Make sure such items can be moved easily so that players can get past it without a struggle.

Making it easy, notes Yolkut, means the player has a more enjoyable experience. Making it difficult can leave a bad taste in an athlete's mouth, "and you don't want people leaving the sport and thinking, 'They don't seem to want to make this easy for me, so why should I bother to play?'"

When working to make accommodations for the athletes, remember that such events may begin to draw spectators who have mobility limitations as well. If applicable, adjust seating so that someone in a wheelchair is able to have good sightlines and to have adequate seating around them to fit their friends, either able-bodied or not. No spectator wants to sit in an area that is isolated from the rest of the crowd.

According to Yolkut, the USTA tends to pick out tournament facilities that are attractive to everyone. Facilities with elevators, without steep ramps, and with seating that allows spectators who are wheelchair-bound (or otherwise mobility-impaired) to move around easily all make for a good experience.

SAFETY FIRST

Then there are the aspects of wheelchair competition that many people don't even know about, according to Matt Hale of Halecon in Bridgewater, NJ. Having these, he notes, can make all the difference between a facility that is not just accessible but welcoming.

"Something I believe is critical, yet often missed is adequate shade for temperature control," Hale notes. "Many individuals with spinal cord or brain injuries are extremely sensitive to temperature, particularly to heat. Some can have life-threatening heat reactions which can occur with little warning. Plan as much shade as possible. I would just stress that surfaces that throw off heat should be avoided. The more shade, the better."

Synthetic turf can hold heat, so keep a careful eye on the surface temperature, and make sure players, administrators, parents, coaches and officials, as well as spectators, are taking all necessary safety precautions.

Plan for athletes' needs both on and off the track or playing field, Hale adds. Having water sources at or near the facility is a must, but so are some other things. "If possible, a cool-down area would be helpful, possibly an enclosed space attached to a bathroom facility, air-conditioned, with electric outlets and water. This space could

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not only provide emergency cooling, but also are a private area for suctioning. Many people with high spinal cord injuries have difficulty breathing, and often use ventilators for assistance. At times, the airway can get blocked with secretions, thus creating an urgent need for suction. Proper suction would require a source for water and electric.”

LEGAL ISSUES

ADA legislation was an enormous help to individuals with physical limitations, but it's far from the end of the road. Parents of students with physical challenges want their kids to be able to participate in sports, and athletic associations are working to develop programs to accommodate their needs.

In addition, new laws are being enacted all the time. One that has the potential to impact all athletic programs in schools across the state of Maryland, for example, will take full effect in 2011: the Fitness and Athletic Equity Law for Students with Disabilities. In short, it ensures that students with disabilities are provided equal opportunities to participate in physical education programs, and athletic activities in Maryland schools. Other states may follow with their own versions.

If you're just starting out, you might be thinking that everything seems very complicated. Remember that making an athletic facility accessible is a process and not an event. Start by seeing to the little

things, e.g., ensuring adequate handicap-accessible parking, curb cuts, etc. Check the width of any gates, and make sure a wheelchair can fit through. Talk about the necessity of shady, cool areas for athletes and spectators. Familiarize yourself with the rules of adapted sports and see if changes need to be made to your facility. Talk to coaches, athletic directors and your local high school or college athletic association.

At the end of it all, though, kids in wheelchairs are, well, kids. And just as with their able-bodied counterparts, they may be interested in any number of different sports; therefore, a sports field should be ready to accommodate those. The Cotting School initiated its Challenger Little League program this spring, according to Manzo, who says students were expressing interest in the program as early as winter.

“The kids were really excited,” Manzo says happily. “Our teams are the Orioles, the A's, the Dodgers and the Cardinals. We don't have the Red Sox because we're in Massachusetts, so obviously every kid would want to be on the Red Sox. And we don't have the Yankees. Obviously.” ■

Mary Helen Sprecher is a free lance writer who previously has written articles for this magazine on behalf of the American Sports Builders Association (ASBA) is a non-profit association helping designers, builders, owners, operators and users understand quality sports facility construction, www.sportsbuilders.org.

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