

From the Sidelines



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Averting another tragedy

LATE IN JANUARY a 9-year-old boy died in Missouri after a soccer goal fell on him. At least eight other youngsters have perished the same way in the past 10 years, a fact I learned from a Google search—and those were found on just the first page.

Here is an open letter written by Jody Gill, CSFM, CPSI, Grounds Coordinator for Blue Valley Schools in Missouri, being circulated by the STMA:

Many of us are dealing with high school, college and professional athletes who are generally going to use equipment, such as soccer goals, as they are intended to be used. Those of us who are responsible for elementary school facilities and equipment need to be especially aware that elementary age children are unpredictable and have not yet developed common sense that would cause them to stop and think before climbing onto or hanging from a structure such as a portable soccer goal.

Most of us were taught the concept of defensive driving as a way to anticipate the actions of other drivers and hopefully prevent the collision from ever happening. As Professional Sports Turf Managers, especially at the elementary school level, we must adapt the defensive driving concept to our field safety programs. We must anticipate the unpredictable actions of children. They are not always going to follow the rules and we cannot expect them to use common sense. It is our job to anticipate their actions and provide them a safe environment whether at recess on the playground or during football practice after school.

Whether on multi-purpose fields or soccer specific fields, it makes sense to use portable soccer goals so we can move the goals around the field to spread the wear and tear on the grass. Preventing tipping of the goals should be a top priority. There are many tools and methods commercially available to anchor goals. We have addressed this by using four earth auger anchors per goal to keep the goals secured to the ground. We also use chain and a padlock on each anchor so the goals cannot be removed from the anchors and to prevent goal relocation by anyone other than my staff. Occasionally the anchors can work loose especially after freeze/thaw cycles. As the snow melts, we will be relocating the goals again and re-anchoring them to get ready for early spring use. You should make sure that school staff such as teachers, paraprofessionals, custodians, etc. are aware of the anchoring procedures and encourage them to inspect them daily and report missing or loose anchors.

Additionally, we use only 12-foot wide, all-aluminum goals at all of our elementary fields. These goals are very lightweight so if these goals tipped the chances of a serious injury is greatly reduced. There are many different soccer goal manufacturers who provide very lightweight, high quality goals. Remember though, even the lightest goal must be anchored.

I know that school budgets have been squeezed to the breaking point. There are many other ways to seek funding for safer goals and for field maintenance needs including school PTA/PTO, local businesses, neighborhood associations, neighborhood garage sales, advertising on school fences, etc. The point is we must use our skills, knowledge and every other available resource to make sure accidents like the one that killed little Jonathan never happen again.

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