When Good Facilities Go Bad

Even the most up-to-date athletic complex with the best equipment can have underlying safety concerns. Our expert outlines how to spot and fix the hazards before any injuries occur.

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Years ago I was asked to evaluate an athletic program at a high school in New York. The athletic director was enthusiastic about showing off the school's track and field facility, and I agreed that it was top notch. The way it was being used, however, was not.

A freshman baseball game was going on at one end of the track infield while the lacrosse team practiced at the other end. The track team was running on the track. Along the right field foul line, pole-vaulters waited to jump in between innings.

The athletic director saw the worried look on my face and said, "We don't have enough field space." I replied, "If you continue this way, you won't have an athletic program."

Even the newest and most beautiful facility can turn into a dangerous environment if the principles of risk management are ignored. In this article, I'll point out how a good facility can go bad.

From solution to hazard: I once suggested to an athletic director that he place a large net between the boys' soccer field and the field next to it, which was being used for field hockey. The fields were about 20 feet apart, and girls were being hit or tripped by soccer balls while the boys had the same experience with field hockey balls.

Nets were put in place between the two fields and the problem was solved. However, to hang the nets, four metal posts were used, and they were not covered with padding. One day, a soccer player ran into an unpadded post and was injured.

The lesson: solving one problem can lead to another if you're not careful. You need to think through all changes to your facility and be on the lookout for any new risks your change may introduce.
**Everything in its place:** In a western state, volleyball standards were left out very close to the end line of a basketball court. The first time a player ran down the court, he was injured when he tripped over the standards, and his family sued the school district.

The school had an adult equipment manager whose job it was to store any equipment not returned by the coach or physical education teacher. In addition, the school's coaching manual contained a list of safety hazards, and it included volleyball standards.

The jury found for the school district (claiming the 17-year-old boy had a responsibility to see the standards and avoid them), but I'm not so sure the same trial in another place would have ended the same way. I was surprised that the jurors did not question the responsibility of the adults involved—the equipment manager, physical education teacher, athletic director, and coaches supervising the drill.

To prevent this scenario from happening at your school, insist that everyone use those storage spaces the architect so carefully designed for your needs. Whether it's the responsibility of the coach or the equipment manager, all equipment should be put where it belongs when an activity is completed.

**Buffer zones are to buffer:** The space between an activity and a wall is there because athletes sometimes leave the playing area at high rates of speed. Without the buffer zone, the chance of injury increases greatly.

Even if your facility is crowded, don't be tempted to use buffer zone space for any other purpose. Don't squeeze a scorer's table between the end line of a basketball court and the wall, don't run a drill between the football sideline and the bleachers, and don't ask your athletic trainer to examine athletes in an active corner of the wrestling room. It's easy to turn appropriate facilities into inappropriate facilities by overcrowding.

"Creative" practice spaces: I have heard legal testimony from athletic directors who allowed floor hockey to be played next to lunchroom windows, dodgeball to be played in basements with machinery close by, and athletic teams to run in hallways with blind spots and glass doors. The above three examples led to injuries and litigation, and the athletic director in the witness chair was not having a good time.

A coach may think she is being creative by finding a great indoor practice space no one has "discovered" yet. But gyms exist for a reason: Most spaces that are not meant for athletic activity are hazardous to conduct athletics in.

**Lock the doors:** Leaving gymnasium doors unlocked without some form of supervision turns them into potential problem areas. In one case, four football players walked into their school gym to "throw the ball around." The game of catch led to a game of touch football, with the walls serving as end zones.
One boy made an over-the-shoulder catch near the end zone wall, then immediately smashed his face into the edge of an open storage door. Obviously, the kids were not thinking about buffer zones, and it's likely a court wouldn't expect them to.

If there is no supervision at a facility, keep it locked. That goes doubly for doors leading into swimming pools.

**Bad adjustments to good facilities:** The maintenance department at an eastern college decided to save money and time lining a practice field. Instead of using paint to create boundary lines, they removed grass, creating dirt lines.

The lines eroded over the year, creating two- and three-inch fissures. During baseball season, a shortstop stepped into one of them and broke his leg. The field was returned to its original design.

Another bad adjustment took place in Connecticut. To get in more batting practice, a coach used two pitchers throwing from opposite sides of the mound to two batters. The idea was for pitcher one to throw to batter one. Seconds later, pitcher two would throw to batter two.

Unfortunately, as pitcher two was winding up to throw, he was struck in the eye with a ball from batter one's bat. The case was settled out of court (and the drill was dropped).

**No shortcuts:** Saving a few minutes or a few bucks is not worth increasing the risk of injury. I wonder why some wrestling coaches don't tape mats during practice. We know seams do separate.

Why do we not fully close the bleachers when we know that last row can be an ankle breaker? I have also seen too many sets of bleachers with no siderails installed filled to the edges with spectators.

How many gyms have you seen and used with maintenance ladders or pianos sitting in the corner? It's easy to forego tasks when we're incredibly busy, but that excuse does not hold up in court.

I've read of a mother winning a lawsuit because she slipped while walking on a gymnasium floor that was wet. It was raining that day and the newly purchased rubber floor mats were not yet in place. Safety cannot be a "sometimes" thing. It must be first and foremost in our minds all day, every day.