

Play Up Social Opportunities



Use shade to increase use of sports facilities

By MARY HELEN SPRECHER



ONE

of the great advantages of sports is they bring people together. Let's face it—it's just plain fun to catch up with friends, whether watching kids in Little League or finishing a great game of pickleball or tennis and wanting to unwind and talk.

In other words, the social experience is its own part of the game. If your park regularly hosts sports (for adults or youth), one of the best ways to drive engagement is to play up the enjoyable aspects of the experience.

Now, ask yourself: Are your sports facilities doing the same thing? If you haven't carved out space for people to sit and enjoy sports in progress, the facilities aren't quite as welcoming as they can be. Here are a few ideas to up the fun factor and bring in the people.



Tables, benches, and bleachers encourage parents, athletes, and bystanders to gather, which can also enrich the post-game experience.



COURTESY OF WELCH TENNIS COURTS, INC. (BOTTOM)



SET ASIDE SOCIAL SPACES

Some facilities, like amateur soccer fields, are constructed so parents can bring folding chairs and sit outside the playing area to watch their children. In fact, the same phenomenon happens outside municipal tennis courts. But for truly inviting seating, think of designated social areas. Tables, benches, and bleachers encourage parents, athletes, and bystanders to gather, which can also enrich the post-game experience.

According to Mark Brogan of Pro-Sport Construction in Berwyn, Penn., all sports can benefit from this approach—although some people seem to bring their own crowd with them.

“The most-often-requested sport is quickly becoming pickleball,” he

notes, “due to the quick learning curve and the social aspect.”

Players will appreciate a designated spectator space to relax with friends, and the addition of tables allows fans to gather and talk more easily than on benches. But if you want to go one step further and create a really inviting space, think shade.

George Todd of Welch Tennis Courts in Sun City, Fla., says, “Canopies are a standard request by our customers.”

EXPLORE SHADE OPTIONS

Shade structures can take many forms, depending upon the budget and the need:

Consider playground structures with integrated roofs to keep children cooler as they play.



- Tables with umbrellas (often available at courts for tennis, pickleball, and basketball). The umbrellas can be stored between seasons or before and during bad weather. This is an inexpensive and affordable option.

- Bleacher systems are now being built with integrated shade structures of varying sizes; shade structures can cover benches near playgrounds so caregivers can remain nearby.

- Playgrounds can also be designed with integrated roofs and shade structures to keep children cooler as they play; some parks have even installed permanent shade structures to cover an entire playground area (with the added bonus of making the playground usable during a rain).

- Single-purpose shade structures, like those that cover lifeguard stands, are an excellent choice. A single post is attached to the pool deck.

Trees are an often-overlooked option for shading spectators and/or social areas.

- Small, permanent structures set outside playing areas. These resemble canopies but are added as a long-term solution in response to shade and social needs.

- Large tension-supported, or even inflatable, structures. These cover a large playing area and can be left up permanently to create an indoor (or outdoor) facility.

- Trees are an often-overlooked option for shading spectators and/or social areas; however, it should be noted that leaves, seeds, branches, and other debris must be cleaned up on a regular basis to keep a surface from becoming stained (in the case of courts for tennis, basketball, and pickleball) or to keep the surface of playgrounds clean.

Note: Should you choose to place furniture outside the perimeter of tennis, basketball, or pickleball courts, talk with a contractor about the durability of the surface—or whether a pad needs to be installed first.

“The most common mistake is placing chairs and other equipment on the court surface,” says Todd. “Even an empty chair can leave indentations on a hot asphalt court. This is also a common issue at clubs and housing-development courts.”

The most important consideration in the placement of any spectator facilities should be safety. All playing areas have two components: the primary playing area (bordered by lines) and an outer area (to be kept clear as a runback and safety zone). The amount of space around a facility, before seating can be added, will be dictated by



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the governing body of the sport itself, and may vary according to the level of play. Under no circumstances should spectators be seated in a way where their presence may interfere with play, or with the work of officials.

UP THE ANTE

In addition to shade and social areas, there are plenty of additional amenities that encourage players and spectators to linger and enjoy the facilities:

- Electrical outlets (those with USB ports are even more desirable) that make it possible for visitors to charge their devices before, during, or after playing
- Water outlets that allow players to refill bottles

- Restrooms (enough said)
- Lighting (not only of the facility but of pathways leading to it to promote safety)
- Adequate parking so users do not have to take up spaces in nearby neighborhoods.

Put thought into the details, and visitors will reward you by making your sports facilities the go-to for leagues, games, and tournaments.

Full information on design, construction, amenities, and accessories for sports facilities can be found in the American Sports Builders Association's publications, *Courts & Recreational Surfaces: Construction and Maintenance Manual*, and *Tennis Courts: Construction & Maintenance Manual* and *Pickleball Courts: Construction & Maintenance Manual*. Information is available at the website, www.sportsbuilders.org. **PRB**

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