

For The

WIN

By Mary Helen Sprecher

Flag football gains yardage in parks and rec

It's difficult to miss the news about youth flag football's growth. Consider the following:

- The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) has seen such high demand that rules are expected to be published as soon as this month.

- The NFL Pro Bowl discarded its tackle game and replaced it with flag football as part of the NFL Pro Bowl Games.

- Flag football will be a showcase sport at the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles, Calif.

- Team USA Flag Football has won the International Federation of American Football (IFAF) Flag Football World Championship six times, most recently in 2024.

- Women's flag football is contested in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) and the National Junior College Athletic Association (NJCAA).





From 2012: Members of the Krush, a team in the Atlanta Women's Flag Football League, run practice drills in a public park.

- Seven Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) will sponsor their first women's flag football programs this year.
- Gallaudet University, a school for the deaf and hard of hearing, will field a women's flag football team in the 2025-2026 season. (Trivia point: Gallaudet University invented the football huddle in 1894 to prevent other teams from seeing their American Sign Language (ASL) signals.)
- NCAA has received an application requesting that flag football join the list of Emerging Sports for Women.

In other words, a lot has happened with the sport, and these developments are expected to fuel more growth. What can parks and recreation directors do to capitalize on that growth and offer programs to residents? Some leaders may be hesitant to get started because they lack foundational knowledge about the sport. What follows are some facts and specifications to help fill the gaps and lay the groundwork for impactful local flag football initiatives.

—| Intro To Flag |—

THE dimensions of a flag football field can range from a regulation football field (120 yards long by 53.3 yards wide) to a small-sided field (such as those used for youth soccer tournaments).

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For example, NFL FLAG (the largest flag football league in the United States, with programs in all 50 states) hosts games in a 5-on-5 format. To compensate for the smaller team size, NFL FLAG fields are shorter than those of typical football fields, at 30 yards wide and 70 yards long, with two 10-yard end zones.

In NAIA play, by contrast, fields are 40 yards wide and have four 20-yard zones with two 10-yard end zones. USA Football specifies that fields must be 30 yards by 53 1/3 yards with two 10-yard end zones (but also notes that some organizations may use smaller fields because of playing space available or to complete tournament scheduling on time).

And that's only three organizations. There are plenty of others at all levels, including municipal programs in many cities, some of which operate independently with others governed by larger entities.

One of the strongest growth areas is in high schools. According to the most recent NFHS High School Athletics Participation Survey, the number of participants in girls'

flag football more than doubled between the 2022-23 and 2023-24 academic years. Data show that 42,955 girls participated in flag football in 2023-24 compared to 20,875 the previous year, a 105 percent increase. As of the opening of this school year, 12 state associations had sanctioned girls' flag football, and another 19 states were piloting programs at some level.

Flag football is an excellent sport for park and rec leagues since, according to officials, it tends to draw in those who may not come from another sport (e.g., soccer, cross country, etc.)—although there is interest in the sport across a range of participants of all skill levels and abilities.

— Game Day Essentials —

To start a program, leaders must meet some baseline requirements.

The Field: Both synthetic and artificial fields are in demand when it comes to hosting this growing sport. However, if a field will be subdivided for small-sided play, it is essential to mark playing lines, which is easier to

do on natural-grass surfaces. If synthetic fields will host small-sided play, contact a turf installer for ideas about delineating playing spaces. In many cases, small plastic cones or moveable flags can be used.

If multiple games are played on a grass field, the grass will eventually show wear. Keep an eye on field conditions to ensure the safest surface for play. If necessary, move games to another area to let the grass rest and rebound between periods of heavy use.

Season: The season for flag football can vary. In many high school systems, for example, it is contested as a spring sport so tackle football programs can use the field in the fall. NAIA and NJCAA also offer spring play. But NFL FLAG plays throughout the year because of geography, weather conditions, and facilities.

Goals: If not using a full-size field with pre-existing goals, you'll need to use moveable or temporary goal posts. A variety of products can be sourced from various vendors in the marketplace. Remember to consider the age of the players when ordering equipment that is appropriately sized.

Belts, Flags, and Balls: These can be purchased from both brick-and-mortar stores and online merchants.

Most programs also require mouthguards for players.

Even though there is no tackling, falls can occur, as can collisions with other players. But other than uniform shirts and coaching and officials' supplies, there aren't any other essential equipment needs.

One of the advantages of flag football at the rec level is its lower price point. No pads, helmets, or specialty footwear need be purchased by either programs or parents, a benefit that can feed into marketing efforts, particularly in under-resourced areas. (In fact, Dr. Karissa Niehoff, CEO of the NFHS, called flag football "a sport of inclusivity.")

With all that going on, the next question becomes, What are you waiting for?

The American Sports Builders Association (ASBA) publishes *Sports Fields: Construction and Maintenance Manual*, which includes information on field design, construction, and care. The book can be purchased in either hard copy or PDF format. Information can be obtained at the association's website, www.sportsbuilders.org. **PRB+**

Mary Helen Sprecher is the technical writer for the American Sports Builders Association (ASBA), and also the editor of two of ASBA's publications, Sports Fields: Construction and Maintenance Manual and Courts & Recreational Surfaces: Construction and Maintenance Manual.



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