

Come One, Come All

Making sports facilities accessible and inclusive

By Mary Helen Sprecher

Neighborhood parks are places where many children participate in their first athletic program. Whether it's recreational tee-ball, baseball, softball, soccer, basketball, tennis, or any other sport, park programs (and the facilities that host them) serve as the launching pad that can ignite a child's lifelong love affair with sports. In fact, parks and rec leaders are likely overseeing programs right now, and the participating kids are discovering all the benefits active play has to offer.

For another segment of the population—those with challenges (either physical or developmental, or those who might fall somewhere between, such as individuals with colorblindness or sensory processing issues)—sports represent an equally important opportunity, not just to become active but to belong, to make friends, and to conquer isolation.

This has created a need for park and recreation managers to ensure their facilities are usable by a wide variety of athletes.

ADA AND BEYOND

All sports facilities currently being designed and built in the U.S., including those in parks, must meet ADA requirements at the time of construction. (For full information on the Americans with Disabilities Act, as well as its requirements for compliance, visit www.ada.gov).

However, advocates for individuals with disabilities note that these requirements tend to establish minimum accommodations, and facilities that are meant to be truly inclusive should exceed those minimums.



If leaders are planning to increase programming for populations with challenges, it is possible to make changes in existing facilities to make them more accessible—starting now.

ACCESSIBILITY AUDITS

One way to up the user-friendliness of a park is to perform a thorough accessibility audit. It is possible to find free survey instruments and checklists online; however, it may be more advantageous to have an in-person audit conducted by an accessibility consultant or a firm that specializes in ADA compliance.

User groups from various sports organizations can also help provide input as to what is helpful and what is needed. When evaluating tennis facilities, for example, or when planning basketball programs for athletes with challenges, obtain input from groups comprised of those athletes, as well as those who work with such athletes, including coaches, trainers, multi-sport organizations, and even medical professionals.

Different sports' governing bodies are also excellent resources; rules for adapted versions of various sports will address any specific accommodations that need to be made for players with challenges.

On the local and state levels, many parks and recreation departments have (or can access) sports initiatives or organizations that serve athletes with disabilities, such as an Office of Therapeutic Recreation. Additionally, the Veterans Administration organizes and promotes opportunities for veterans



with disabilities. These and other organizations may be able to provide valuable input about creating adaptive programs and making facilities more welcoming to all.

OUTDOOR COURT SPORTS (TENNIS, BASKETBALL, PICKLEBALL, ETC.)

Ideally, all courts should be accessible; however, at a bare minimum, at least one court must be fully accessible in each park.

Paths to and from courts must accommodate wheelchairs. A path width of at least 48" (1.2m), with occasional wider areas for turning and passing, is recommended. The surface of any accessible path must be firm and non-slip in all weather conditions. Inclines should be gradual enough for comfort and safety.

Accessible gates into courts should be 48" (1.2m) and doorways into enclosures and spectator areas must be at least 36" (0.9m) wide. If possible, doors should be automatic and/or power-assisted.





Sport-specific wheelchair dimensions must be taken into consideration. A wheelchair is not normally wider than 30" (762 mm), but wheelchairs designed for tennis, for example, may have as much as 21 degrees of

camber (the angle of the large rear wheels), making them 34" to 42" (0.86m to 1.06m) wide where the rear wheels meet the ground. Sport-chair wheels may be removable, however, making access through narrower gates possible.

Fence mazes, often used to help secure and safeguard court facilities, can be accessible if the dimensions allow wheelchair users to turn easily and enter the court. Measure all openings and work with wheelchair users, particularly those with sport chairs, to discover if the fence mazes will accommodate them. It may be necessary to reconfigure some fencing to make a facility truly accessible.

SHADE REQUIREMENTS

Advocates for people with disabilities have a strong preference for increased amounts of shade and cooler areas for both athletes and spectators. Many individuals, including but not limited to those with spinal cord injuries, may not tolerate heat well. Additional amenities, such as misting stations and places where water bottles can be refilled, will be appreciated by all users.

INDOOR FACILITIES (BASKETBALL, SEATED VOLLEYBALL, WHEELCHAIR RUGBY, ETC.)

Indoor recreational facilities can host any number of sports for those with challenges, assuming they are either (a) at ground level, or (b) have elevators, in the case of multi-floor buildings.

RESTROOMS, LOCKER ROOMS, AND SHOWERS

There must be clear access to restrooms (with an adequate number of accessible stalls). Sinks, paper towel dispensers, and other amenities should be reachable and usable by those in wheelchairs.

If shower facilities and locker room facilities are needed, determine if they are also accessible. Advocates for those with challenges will be able to give further input, including ideas



such as the addition of adult changing tables and other amenities.

HOSTING SPORTS EVENTS

Since sports for individuals with disabilities tend to attract spectators with disabilities, parks that host such events regularly may need to have more than the required minimum number of handicap-accessible features for spectator seating and parking (as well as restrooms, concessions, and other amenities, including curb cuts, ramps, elevators, and more).

While no park or facility can be all things to all people with all types of challenges, the overarching goal should be to create a venue that is welcoming to as many athletes as possible. **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.



Just for the fun of it!®



Safe and fun playground surfacing



(951) 250-6039 playmaxsurfacing.com