

Sports Are For Every Body





Looking beyond the ADA for ways to accommodate all users

BY MARY HELEN SPRECHER

A local park is open to everybody. But is it open to every *body*?

Can individuals with disabilities participate in its recreational programs, use its facilities, and access the conveniences available to able-bodied users?

While compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is almost a given in public facilities nationwide, true accessibility goes beyond curb cuts and ramps. And when it comes to sports, the opportunities are expanding. Consider the following examples.



THE MIRACLE LEAGUE

The motto of The Miracle League is simple: “Every child deserves the chance to play baseball.” Key to the organization’s mission are accessible fields and rules designed to assist all players in enjoying the game. Several surface options are recommended:

- **Poured-in-Place Rubber:** It allows for ease of navigation, as well as shock absorption in case of falls. It is also available in a wide variety of colors, including those that replicate traditional baseball infield and outfield combinations.
- **Synthetic Turf:** Field components include a short nylon pile with a backing that is glued down to an asphalt base, creating a surface firm enough for wheelchairs and walkers, while allowing for movement of the ball.

The Miracle League also encourages the construction of inclusive and accessible playgrounds near the fields.

Note: The term Miracle Field is often used to describe any accessible field; however, the Miracle Field is a branded term specific to the Miracle League.

WHEELCHAIR TENNIS AND WHEELCHAIR PICKLEBALL

These two sports use existing park facilities. Many players use lightweight, sport-specific chairs equipped with soft pneumatic or polyurethane tires to avoid leaving marks on the surface.

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

Accessible gates into courts should be 48" (1.2m), and doorways into enclosures, restrooms, and spectator areas must be at least 36" (0.9m) wide. A wheelchair is not normally wider than 30" (762 mm); however, wheelchairs designed for tennis and pickleball 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.

Sports-chair wheels may be removable, however, making access through narrower gates possible—although in a park that is marketed as being fully accessible, athletes should not be subjected to this inconvenience.

If athletes are using one chair for a game and another for personal transportation, there should be a safe place to store the chairs that aren't being used at the moment.

The national governing bodies for each sport, the U.S. Tennis Association and USA Pickleball, can provide details on the rules of each sport as they pertain to wheelchair play.



GOALBALL

Unlike other sports that are adapted versions of traditional games (including wheelchair basketball, bocce, tennis, pickleball, and rugby), goalball is played only by athletes who are blind or visually impaired. All players wear eye masks to equalize visual impairment among the athletes.

The object of the game is to throw a ball (which has bells inside so players can locate it) into the net of the opposing team. (Because of this, the sport, when played, resembles handball or soccer.)

Goalball is played indoors on a court the same size as a volleyball court; however, specific sensory elements are incorporated. The lines of the court have strings under them so the players can feel them, and a silent area is needed for play so athletes are aware of one another and the ball.

The national governing body is the United States Association of Blind Athletes.

Park Amenities That Welcome ALL Users

Creating an accessible park means paying attention to other amenities—not only those pertaining to sports.

Pathways throughout the park should 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, and pathways around any areas that could present a danger (such as ponds) should be appropriately fenced.

Seating must accommodate both able-bodied visitors and those with challenges. Intersperse companion seating with areas designated for those with wheelchairs, walkers, or other mobility devices—as well as for their companions. Bleacher and bench manufacturers can provide guidance.

Restrooms should also be considered. While ADA mandates the presence of accessible toilet facilities, those who want to create a better experience for guests with various challenges should keep in mind other items:

- **Stall Doors:** A person in a wheelchair, or a person using a walker, may find a stall door that swings inward toward the toilet to be an obstacle, since once the person gets past the door and into the stall, his or her mobility equipment may prevent the door from closing.

- **Adequate Turning Space:** Think about getting into a restroom stall in a chair, then trying to maneuver out of the chair and onto the toilet. If the restroom stall is not wide enough for the user to turn his or her chair or move his or her walker to one side, it is too narrow.

- **Adult Changing Tables:** Individuals with challenges come in all ages and sizes. No person should have to lie on the floor of a restroom, even briefly.





Advocates for those with disabilities consider the ADA to be a baseline for accommodations. A fully accessible park will need more than the required minimum number of handicap-accessible parking, restrooms, and other amenities.

For more information on sports facilities, including those designed to be accessible, the American Sports Builders Association recommends the following publications. For information or to order, visit www.sportsbuilders.org and mouse over the top blue toolbar reading "Resources":

- *Courts & Recreational Surfaces: Construction and Maintenance Manual*
- *Tennis Courts: Construction & Maintenance Manual*
- *Running Tracks: A Construction and Maintenance Manual*
- *Sports Fields: Construction & Maintenance Manual*
- *Indoor Wood Sports Surfacing: Installation & Maintenance Manual*
- *Pickleball Courts: Construction & Maintenance Manual*
- *Padel Courts: Installation & Maintenance Manual* **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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