

Accessible Facilities

ADA is just the stepping stone

BY MARY HELEN SPRECHER

More than three decades ago the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) became law. At the time, it was groundbreaking, ushering in an era in which accessible restrooms, wheelchair ramps for public facilities, curb cuts, and other means of accommodation were mandated.

But ADA can only mandate so much, and advocates for those with physical and developmental challenges are quick to note that ADA is only a baseline. To truly create an open and welcoming society, more action must be taken.

What does that mean in terms of parks? Several things, really. Here are considerations, according to members of the American Sports Builders Association (ASBA):

Physical Accessibility

“This might be the most obvious factor, but it can never be talked about, or thought about, enough,” says Matt Hale of Halecon in Bridgewater, N.J. “Good

parking with handicap access, nice, wide, lightly sloped walkways, and nice, wide gates (win locations that make sense) have turned into normal on almost every project.”

Heading Off Sensory Issues

Todd Dettor of Fast-Dry Courts, Inc., in Pompano Beach, Fla., while working as a volunteer at a Special Olympics event, realized there was more to creating user-friendly facilities than merely adding wheelchair paths.

“What I realized was that a lot of those individuals were mobile and quite capable but were sometimes hypersensitive to loud noises, distractions, heat, etc.,” Dettor recalls. “Perhaps some approaches would be to go big on shaded areas and maybe create more private participation areas, which are not as intimidating. There are also large numbers of supporting family members and caregivers that require space for observation, spectators, etc.”



ACCESSIBLE RAMPS PROVIDE MULTIPLE CHOICES FOR SPECTATORS TO VIEW FIELDS AND ENJOY A FACILITY.



Livestreaming To Create Better Access

Hale points out that creating a user-friendly experience could mean livestreaming the event to those at home, to help illustrate how much fun such events are, to bring in new users next time.

“The most impressive facilities would be those that are equipped to go live, so that spectators who can’t be at the facility can watch the game. There are many reasons parents, siblings, and significant others can’t be at every game, and this is a way to include them.”

For those who can’t attend games or events, or whose tolerance for external stimulation is limited, a multitude of apps are available, allowing for scorekeeping, live video streaming (and, for those in charge of such events, team management).

Additionally, Dettor says, in the case of multi-day events, individuals may be unable to remain on the premises, but might be allowed to return for other games or the finals. Such gestures of inclusion help individuals stay connected, even if their tolerance for stimulation is limited.

Bringing In Special Spectators

A park with accessible sports facilities has won half the battle. The other half pertains to the fans in the stands. Tim Gerrits of GMB in Holland, Mich., has worked on designing projects that consider a wide range of user groups.

One of GMB’s projects, he notes, has “dispersed seating throughout the complex, including multiple-level grandstands with elevator access (left-side stadium pillar), providing multiple choices for spectators to view the fields and enjoy the facility. There are also multiple ground-level entry points with access to the fields, and barrier-free locker rooms create accessibility for players, coaches, support staff, etc.”

In another project, he notes, “With the idea of accessibility for all in mind throughout the project, sunken dugouts were included in the new baseball and softball turf fields, which is not typical at a high school level. A ramp allows access into the dugout for players, support members, or coaches.” Another project, a tennis facility, offers an excellent player and spectator experience, using permanent elevated seating that is accessible by a ramp leading to the upper concourse.

Facilities set up for those with specific disabilities may require further modifications to remove obstacles. For example, individuals with hearing impairments need a visual means of communication beyond a public-address system. Those with visual impairments may need Braille signage, as well as individuals to serve as guides. Athletes and visitors should also be able to bring service animals, such as seeing-eye dogs.

Fields That Welcome Every “Body”

Jay Henley of Covington Flooring in Birmingham, Ala., says there is an increase in the number of sports fields for athletes with challenges.

“A lot of those fields are being put in,” he notes. Indeed, the rise of Miracle Leagues, which have the stated goal of providing opportunities for individuals of every age and ability to play baseball, have resulted in the development of several game-specific (and special user-specific) surfaces.

In some cases, special rubber fields (colored to resemble the infields and outfields of ball diamonds) are known colloquially as “miracle fields,” while in others, synthetic turf is specifically engineered to not interfere with walkers, wheelchairs, or athletes who might otherwise have trouble navigating the fields.



MIRACLE FIELDS OFTEN UTILIZE SPECIAL RUBBER FIELDS OR SYNTHETIC TURF SPECIFICALLY ENGINEERED TO NOT INTERFERE WITH WALKERS, WHEELCHAIRS, OR ATHLETES WHO MIGHT OTHERWISE HAVE TROUBLE NAVIGATING FIELDS.

Types Of Competition

Athletes with physical and developmental challenges may compete in multiple ways:

- On the same playing field as their able-bodied counterparts but in different classifications (examples include athletes in wheelchairs or those with amputations who compete in marathons, triathlons, and other races, alongside able-bodied individuals)
- On the same playing field but in separate competitions (wheelchair basketball, for example, uses the same court and net as traditional basketball; however, players using wheelchairs have their own games and tournaments)
- In sports that have been adapted for play by those with physical issues (for example, wheelchair rugby and sitting volleyball)
- In sports that have been created specifically to allow for competition by athletes with disabilities (goalball is one example).

Unified competitions (programs that include individuals with and without disabilities) are another area of para sports. For example, the Special Olympics includes these programs. (Note: The National Federation of State High School Associations has recorded a distinct uptick in unified sports participation in its most recent report.)

In every instance, professionals working with user groups say that including athletes with specific challenges, as well as their caregivers and advocacy groups, can help identify needs and provide recommendations that might otherwise go unrecognized.

More expansive information on the design, construction, amenities, and accessories for sports facilities for individuals with special challenges can be found in the ASBA's publications, *Courts & Recreational Surfaces: Construction and Maintenance Manual*. Information is available at the website, www.sportsbuilders.org. **PRB**

Mary Helen Sprecher is a technical writer for the American Sports Builders Association (ASBA), the professional association for those who design, build, maintain, and supply equipment and materials for the sports-facility construction industry. She is also the editor of ASBA's publication, *Sports Fields: A Construction and Maintenance Manual*, and is the managing editor of *Sports Destination Management*. Reach her at mhsprecher@gmail.com or maryhelen@sportsbuilders.org.

To comment on this article, visit ParksAndRecBusiness.com