

A New Season is Here: Are Your Sports Facilities Ready?

By Mary Helen Sprecher

The weather is warming up, the birds are singing, and the athletes are moving out of the gym and back to the fields and courts. And that means many athletic directors are having that “Uh-oh” moment: Are the facilities ready for competition?

It’s a valid question. With a long, strange school year partially behind us, and many spring sports programs beginning to reopen, it’s a sure bet that there will be pent-up demand among students who want to get back to their teams. Unfortunately, maintenance personnel may be stretched thin trying to cope with everything at once.

Because the sheer scope of work to be done is initially daunting, builders advise creating a master list of all the athletic facilities on campus. Next, prioritize the facilities that are going to see active competition soonest. In the spring, that might include your track and field, tennis courts, baseball and softball fields and lacrosse field – although certainly, this year, there may be some sports that are typically played in the fall that will be held in spring instead. Review the list, then grab your phone, a notepad and pen. It’s time to begin.



Photo Credit: Todd Smith, PhD, PE, LEED AP, R&R Engineers-Surveyors, Inc.

First Steps

There’s no substitute for putting in the time to look – really look – at each venue. And, says Lee Narozanick, CFB, CTB of American Athletic Courts, Inc. and Florida Track and Turf, that doesn’t mean just leaning on the fence while checking text messages.

“Whatever, the facility, a facility manager should make a thorough onsite walkthrough. You may have to walk the fields, courts, tracks, etc., several times to determine all of the facility’s maintenance needs. You should look at the edges, the lines and the surface.”

It’s easy, he adds, to fall into the trap of thinking everything is fine because the facility has never had issues before.

“Everything will usually seem to be intact for a couple of years. But as the years add up, there will be problems. Even if the facility has been maintained and cleaned properly, you can still develop problems over time. Entrances and exits will have a lot of foot traffic, so this should be an area of concern. High play areas such as tennis court baselines, field goal areas, end lines, free kick and hit marks, foul lanes, pitcher’s mound bases, base paths, batter boxes, team areas, etc. may have developed worn areas that will need to be attended to by professionals.”

In many cases, the readiness of any facility in a given season will depend upon how much care it had in its off season, says Matt Wimer, CFB-N, of Hummer Turfgrass Systems, Inc.

“In my experience, this is really a question of how much staff is available to work on fields and the equipment that they have available to them. For example, we recommend baseball and softball fields be prepared for spring use the prior fall. However, if the staff is busy lining fields for soccer and football, as well as mowing, aerating and overseeding them, then the baseball and softball work doesn’t get accomplished.”

Having an annual maintenance planner for each facility, showing what needs to be done at various times of the year, is essential to having courts, fields, tracks and other facilities be competition-ready at the appropriate time.



Photo Credit: Todd Smith, PhD, PE, LEED AP, R&R Engineers-Surveyors, Inc.

Be Proactive

Setting up a maintenance plan doesn't have to be complicated, says Barbara Dobbs of Dobbs Tennis Courts, Inc. And the tools don't have to be sophisticated. She recommends a leaf blower.

"Blow off the courts to keep them free of organic material (grass, pollen, dust) that will turn to mold/mildew if allowed to stand on wet or damp courts. This should be done on a regular basis. Also take the time to inspect the windscreens and replace any missing zip ties on a regular basis. Inspect the fences and replace any missing metal ties that attach the chain link to the frame."

When it comes to fields, says Todd Smith, PhD, PE, LEED AP of R&R Engineers-Surveyors, Inc., be vigilant about surface conditions. A school's maintenance crew can take certain steps, including monitoring infill levels and adding infill as necessary, "mainly in high-use areas, team areas, goal mouths, crease area for lacrosse, penalty and center kick areas for soccer, batter's box and base areas for baseball/softball. We also have a handful of owners who have the equipment, tools and training, and they've become very good at fixing minor seam rips and problems." (Smith defines a minor rip as anything less than three feet).

To keep tracks performing well, keep the surface clean (again, a blower is a great help to rid of not only leaves but grit that could be ground into the surface). Walking completely around the facility regularly should also be a regular habit.

"Inspect the surface looking for anything out of the ordinary," says Paul Nagle, CTB, of The Astroturf Corporation. Among the red flags, he notes, are "cracks, humps, depressions, mold and mildew. If you see something and you are unsure what it is, take a picture and forward to a surfacing expert."

Don't Take Shortcuts

Taking shortcuts (even the most well-meaning) in order to save money can actually wind up costing more in damage to facilities. A few hints from contractors:

Opt for Professionally Applied Lines if Adding Pickleball to Tennis Courts: “Do not put tape on the tennis courts to create pickleball lines – even if the tape says it is for temporary use,” says Barbara Dobbs. In addition to often going looking crooked, tape can cause unsightly damage to the court surface, which then needs to be recoated. For a better result, a court contractor can apply pickleball lines to the court surface in a contrasting color so that both sports can be played.

Ask a Contractor About Surface Cracks: “On occasion, maintenance personnel will fill cracks on tennis courts and touch up the paint surface,” says Justan Vaughn, CTCB of McConnell & Associates, Inc. “We like to give a few pointers when that happens to make sure they don't get themselves in a bigger pickle. One of those pickles is when a hot pour crack filler is used to fill the cracks. That is one of the most frequent mistakes I come across. Hot rubber, typically used in filling parking lot cracks, will melt on hot days and can be tracked across the surface by the players. Removing the rubber is very expensive, often doubling or tripling what the initial patch price would have been in the first place.”

Additionally, cracking sometimes can be a sign of underlying problems in the court so have a contractor examine the court surface and recommend the appropriate treatment.

Drainage Problems Should be Referred to a Contractor: “Tackling drainage work is something that we see a lot of people do with less than desirable results,” says Matt Wimer. “Drainage issues cover so many variables and conditions; on some fields, grading needs to be corrected, internal drainage needs to be installed or water entering the field from surrounding areas needs to be redirected. These are all issues a sports field contractor has experience in diagnosing and solving.”



Photo Credit: Todd Smith, PhD, PE, LEED AP, R&R Engineers-Surveyors, Inc.

Know Your Limitations

Contractors encourage athletic directors and facility managers to call with questions. If it's an easy D-I-Y fix, the contractor is usually glad to explain. If, however, it requires specialized expertise or equipment, arrangements can be made early – before the season begins and games need to be postponed or relocated.

Because spring brings changing conditions, it is advisable to ask your contractor for advice on what can be done safely.

“Snow plowing or any type of driving on the field seems to cause more problems in the spring,” says Todd Smith. “Some people have been plowing the fields for months when the base was frozen, so they keep on doing it in the spring, but at that point, the subbase has become wet and soft. Or we've had well-intentioned friends or parents of a player bring their own pickup with a plow onto the field thinking they'll help get the snow off. There are so many problems with this: These plows usually have sharp edges and rip the field. The driver tries to move too much snow at once and creates ruts. The driver gets too aggressive and stretches the field to where the lines are all crooked. They get the plow deep into the infill which moves too much infill to the sidelines.”

And, Smith notes, that's not the only way facilities get damaged. Maintenance vehicles that are driven over tracks and onto fields can cause damage to both surfaces; if vehicles are leaking oil or gas, this too can cause unsightly stains. Heavy equipment that is dragged across surfaces is also likely to cause damage.



Photo Credit: Todd Smith, PhD, PE, LEED AP, R&R Engineers-Surveyors, Inc.

Get the Information You Need

Setting out to create a plan for maintenance might be an overwhelming task. The good news is that there is plenty of assistance available. The American Sports Builders Association (ASBA), made up of designers, contractors and suppliers of materials and equipment for sports facilities – tennis and pickleball courts, sports fields, running tracks and indoor sports surfaces – has a number of resources to assist coaches, athletic directors and facility managers.

Among ASBA's publications are the following; all include information on construction, repair and maintenance:

- *Sports Fields: A Construction and Maintenance Manual*
- *Pickleball Courts: A Construction & Maintenance Manual*
- *Running Tracks: A Construction and Maintenance Manual*
- *Tennis Courts: A Construction and Maintenance Manual*
- *Indoor Sports Surfaces: An Installation and Maintenance Manual*

To learn more or to order any of these publications, [click here](#).

ASBA also has a [Bid Info Request Form](#) for those seeking assistance with construction, renovation or just general guidance.

The Association also has a membership directory which it can provide free to those who request it; contact ASBA at 866-501-ASBA (2722) or info@sportsbuilders.org. Additionally, the [Association's website](#) allows visitors to look up contractors who serve their area, or who have specific expertise.