

Interscholastic Athletic Administration



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SHOWING THE WAY – Leadership, Education and Service



By George Bernardon, CSFM, CPSI, CTM

Athletic field injuries are a concern for all athletic directors. Injuries will always be a part of sports, but a player should never have to worry about suffering an injury as a result of an unsafe playing surface. With proper and consistent inspection, you can rest assured that your playing surface remains safe while looking great.

As a certified sports field manager (CSFM), certified playground safety inspector (CPSI), umpire and a coach of youth sports, I possess various and unique perspectives regarding athletic field safety. An athletic venue is like equipment that an athlete uses for protection and is at its best when functioning within its designed intent. Athletic directors and field managers must ensure prudent measures are taken to provide a safe venue for athletes, while maintaining an aesthetically pleasing venue.

Before each contest, I walk the playing surface and make mental notes based on my training as a CSFM and CPSI to ensure the field is in safe playing condition and that I am prepared for any situation that may arise. For example, prior to umpiring a game a few years ago, my partner and I checked several things, one of which came into play during the game. Upon pregame inspection, I noticed that none of the bases were break-away. Midway through the game a player attempted to steal second, sliding headfirst into the bag. As the base umpire, I saw the play up close and witnessed that the base did not move, contributing to the player breaking an arm when he slid hard into the bag. I have seen similar situations on soccer and football fields with irrigation heads set too high or low. Taking time to inspect the surroundings can help with proper pregame instructions, warning players of potential hazards or taking corrective measures.

As a CSFM, I look at safety inspections in four ways: high frequency, low frequency, audit and aesthetics. As an individual that provides oversight for multiple venues/fields, I

have set up check-off sheets for field managers to use to ensure proper inspection. Having checklists does not eliminate the need for a common sense and a proactive approach, but it does provide a means by which to remind and track inspections. All those responsible to ensure fields are safe must take a stewardship mentality in order to be proactive.

Four Levels of Inspection

High Frequency – Each time anyone responsible for a field steps onto the playing surface, he/she scans it looking for any potential risk. The initial intent is not to inspect the field, but to make note of any issue that may become a liability. This does not require a check off-sheet, but a mental note or a call into the office to generate a work order. Typical high frequency reviews might include: surface integrity, torn sod, peeling carpet or fencing with exposed wire.

Low Frequency – The field manager conducts an inspection of the field with a check-off sheet and records the inspection for documentation purposes. Inspecting and recording demonstrates prudent management of a field if all deficiencies have a record of repair or request for repair within an established amount of time. Examples of inspection may include: walking an entire field in small quadrants looking for inconsistencies in the surface, documenting all inconsistencies with a location chart and repair needed, compaction measurements, drain review, irrigation heads, goals and goal areas, skinned surfaces, batter's boxes, pitching areas, entrances to dugouts and many more. When conducting the low-frequency review, fill out the check-off sheet, make additions to the sheet if the item is not listed, and record all deficiencies with a priority of repair order. Be sure to look beyond the field play area and check lighting, fences, seating, benches, etc. Record all recommendations and repairs by date and who made the repair.

Audit – Bring in an independent auditor such as a CSFM to conduct the audit of fields and an engineer or insurance adjustor/inspector for structural or building maintenance. By conducting high, low, and audit reviews, an athletic director can be assured he or she has taken reasonable steps to provide safe athletic venues. While not all injuries can be avoided, with proper and diligent inspection we can ensure the integrity of the playing surface in hopes of reducing the chance of one occurring.

Aesthetics – A progressive field manager will implement all required cultural management techniques so that the field looks its best while maintaining a safe playing surface. Fertilization, uniform distribution of water, aeration, top dressing, pest abatement, proper mowing technique and frequency, and consistent inspection are just a few practices that create an aesthetically pleasing and safe playing surface.

Look beyond the obvious when viewing the pictures at right and pick out the issues that impact the safety of a venue. **IAA**

Check List

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1. Pitcher's mound: Grass has overtaken the mound and there is a large divot in front of the rubber where the pitcher's plant foot is placed.
2. Football field: The drainage was designed to come across the surface of the field. However as the water crosses the field, it creates divots beneath the turf. This issue is not visual but felt when walking the field with soft, flat shoes.
3. Soccer Field: The area in front of the goal is worn and creates an inconsistent playing surface. In addition, there is a tree only 20 feet out of bounds, creating a serious safety hazard.
4. Football field: If you do everything to provide a safe playing field, the aesthetics aspect will take care of itself. As you can see, this field looks inconsistent. This picture, if viewed closer, reveals non-uniformity in irrigation, fertilizer inconsistency, high Bahia population, divots and irrigation heads too low or high. The first clue that the integrity of this field is comprised is its poor aesthetics.
5. What structural integrity does sand offer when it is placed on top of the ground and not blended in? Not much. When sand is exposed to wind and sun, it dries out and becomes extremely unstable. This unstable footing could potentially cause a serious tear for anyone who steps on this field.
6. A Penetrometer tests the compaction of the soil. In this picture, the field still had aeration cores on its surface. However, compaction was extremely severe at the 2-inch level, creating a hard playing surface.
7. This picture of a soil profile reveals multiple soil horizons, making it difficult for turf to root deeply, creating a loose-knit surface. However, if you look very closely, the soil was top dressed with brick dust in the past. This allows the field to drain well, but creates an extremely hard surface just below thatch layer.
8. This is the 48-inch-tall outfield fence of a baseball field, revealing not much margin for error.