

The Duty To Provide Safe Facilities

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A comprehensive sports/physical education program involves a number of important components to provide a safe and rewarding outcome.

Several years ago "Safeguarding the Health of the Athlete" was published as a joint statement of The Committee On The Medical Aspects Of Sports of the AMA and the National Federation of State High School Athletic Associations. It included: (1) Proper Conditioning, (2) Careful Coaching, (3) Good Officiating, (4) Right Equipment and Facilities, and (5) Adequate Medical Care.

Along with the duty to instruct, the duty to supervise, and others, we have a duty to provide safe facilities - both for our participants as well as spectators.

One must allow the term "foreseeability" to have true meaning whether in coaching, teaching physical education classes, or conducting the prevention aspect of athletic training. To see injury before it happens allows one to remove or correct hazards. This would require a plan to ensure that nothing was missed in the process. What may appear beautiful and safe may, in fact, present danger to participants and spectators, for example, a swimming pool with a glass wall allowing the sun to create a glare on the water. A lifeguard stationed facing the glare would have difficulty seeing a swimmer in trouble. Walls, ceilings and floors can also present a hazard if they blend in with balls used in particular games. To install carpet outside the clear backwall of a racquetball court the same color of blue as the racquetball would prove troublesome for participants and their ability to follow the ball in flight. Oversights in design or construction must be corrected.

We must decide which hard, fixed objects need to be padded. Without question, the basketball backboard bumper guard is a must. The base of the goal at the floor has to have adequate protection from injury. Are dugouts in baseball in need of some protective padding? Are football goalposts always padded? Are wrestling room walls padded? Are light poles at baseball and softball fields a safe distance from the playing field? We are considered the experts and must be responsible for this protection.

"Inspection" plays an important role in providing safe facilities. Fencing around our various play areas needs to be checked (inspected). Are the spikes pointing toward the ground as they should be or is the fence upside down? When athletic fencing overlaps, is the overlap correct or is it exposing sharp spikes?

Seating for spectators requires a certain amount of regular care. If using bleachers, railings must be located along the back as well as both ends. Inspecting for unsafe seating before each event is a must.

Studies have revealed that athletic fields that are also used for intramurals, physical education and other school functions tend to receive more "wear and tear" and therefore, more injuries and the need for more frequent inspection.

When repairs or remodeling of the facility occur, was safety in mind in the planning phase? Were those who use the facility consulted for their input?

Another important aspect of facility care is that of maintenance. Well planned facilities are easier to maintain. Those daily responsibilities of maintenance personnel can be handled more efficiently if they are not constantly faced with obstacles. As an example, locker seating without legs extending to the floor aids in the cleaning process of the floor. Cooperation of all those using a facility to ensure that athletic equipment is properly stored after use will also permit maintenance procedures to operate more smoothly.

When a hazard is encountered at a particular activity area, we need to have a contingency plan in mind. Will the activity planned have to be cancelled? Can it be modified, which would avoid the danger? Will moving to another location be the best choice?

Although some coaches and teachers may view the care and upkeep of a facility falling on the shoulders of others, they must accept the fact that safety of the participant will always include the condition of the court or field he or she is playing on.

References

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- Overcash v. Stateville City Board of Education*, 348 S.E.2d 524 (N.C.App. 1986).
- Gravely v. Lewisville Independent School District*, 701 S.W. 2d 956 (Tx. 1986).
- Brock v. Rockridge Community Unit District 300*, 539 N.E.2d 445 (Ill. 1989).
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