

Shape Up

TAKE A QUICK LOOK at your community's welcome kit or website. It probably mentions all the great amenities your community offers residents, perhaps including recreational facilities, such as basketball courts and fitness trails.

But are those amenities really worth bragging about?

If it's been a while since you inspected your basketball court, fitness trail or other recreational facilities, it's time to give them a checkup. You might be surprised what you find. Everyday wear and tear has a way of sneaking up on you. You might not notice the cracks and stains, but a newcomer to your community certainly will.

It's time to regain those bragging rights, according to members of the American Sports Builders Association.

ORDER IN THE COURT

Let's start with your basketball court. Are there stains on the surface? Is the backboard looking shabby? Those are signs that your court needs work. It doesn't have to be expensive either. Some improvements can be done by your maintenance crew—or even an energetic group of volunteers. The important thing is to recognize which jobs are the do-it-yourself kind and which ones fall in the don't-try-this-at-home category.

Maintenance work generally can be done in-house, as long as it's done regularly. For example, if your basketball court is made of asphalt or concrete with an acrylic coating, the surface will start to look dirty over time. Tree sap, sand and leaves all leave their marks.

Unfortunately, constant play on top of that debris tends to abrade the surface. The good news is that you can remove those materials before they create a problem.

Remove leaves with a leaf blower rather than a rake, which can scratch the court's surface. Then, use a garden hose with a spray nozzle to remove dirt and other debris. (Pressurized washers are great too, but should only be used by an experienced operator. In the wrong hands, they can damage the court's surface.)

If there are stains on the court, scrub them with a soft brush and plain warm water. If that doesn't work, add a gentle dish soap. Harsh cleansers can damage court coatings, causing discoloration, wear and fading. Because surface coatings differ, contact the manufacturer of the court coating for suggested cleaning products.

If your basketball net is torn or disintegrating, replace it. Your backboard too might benefit from a quick cleanup. If it's made of wood, you can repaint it. The results can be dramatic.

If your court is fenced, look for sagging, bulging or drooping rails. Your maintenance team may be able to fix this, or a fencing professional can be called in. If there are sharp edges or burrs on the metal fabric of the fence, fix those immediately before someone gets hurt. Bend the sharp edges under and make sure other dangerous areas are taped, wrapped or painted.

Cracks in the asphalt are common and can have a variety of causes, some more serious than others. A sports facility professional (as opposed to an asphalt pro) can diagnose the problem and recommend a treatment plan. The important thing is to keep an eye on the surface.

"Begin filling any cracks that appear as soon as possible," says David Marsden, treasurer of Boston Tennis Court



Construction Company in Hanover, Mass. For simple surface problems, there are a multitude of crack repair products on the market. Use one specifically developed for sport surfaces.

While the surface of a basketball court is made to tolerate bouncing balls, foot traffic and the occasional scuffle, it will wear down eventually. When the time comes to put down a new coating and lines on the court, make an informed choice, the pros say.

"Use deeper colors such as reds since they show fewer shoe marks," advises Art Tucker, vice president of California Products Corp. in Andover, Mass. "Carefully consider the texture specified. Since basketball can be played in damp weather, it may be wise to select a coarser texture. Basketball has intense usage in defined areas. It is wise to put an extra coat in the key." (The key is the area under the basket that receives the most wear.)

If the court does need more in-depth work, says Mark Brogan, president of Pro-Sport Construction Inc. in Devon, Pa., choose a contractor that specializes in athletic facilities.

"Basketball courts are basically built to very tight tolerance," notes Brogan. "When basketball courts are built with the mindset that they're just another parking lot with a hoop at each end, they usually wind up looking just like

that—a parking lot. Don't overlook the importance of good construction.”

Another common problem with many public basketball courts is the fact that they are public. As a result, a lot more than just basketballs impact the surface. Scooters, bikes, skateboards and dogs can wreak havoc. Post signs stating the rules, and encourage residents to be stewards of the facility by reporting unauthorized users.

HAPPY TRAILS

Another recreational amenity gaining in popularity is the fitness trail. The trail may be any length and can have a wide variety of surfaces, ranging from low-budget crushed stone, called crusher run, to the more expensive full-pour polyurethane surface, similar to a competition running track. In the middle of the budget spectrum are trails made of asphalt or concrete. Some trails also

have wooden or metal bridges where the trails cross streams.

“Many exercise trails are being built at 8 and 9 feet in width with the hope of being used for running, walking as well as bicycling,” says Sam Fisher, president of Fisher Tracks in Boone, Iowa.

To ensure user safety, keep the trail free of debris, such as leaves, pine cones and branches. Keep the grass cut on both sides of the trail, and trim any overhanging branches. If trees are near the path, keep the roots trimmed back. Roots that grow under the trail can break the paved (or rubberized) surface, causing cracks and uneven surfaces that can trip users.

Trails made of uncoated asphalt or concrete may be safely plowed when snow falls. But snow plows can damage an expensive rubberized surface and may do more harm than good on a surface made of crusher run. Also, before you use an ice-melting compound on a rubberized track, check with the trail installer to make sure the product is safe for the surface.

Some communities also install fitness stations along the trails. These include equipment in strategic spots, where people can stop and exercise. The stations might include horizontal bars for pull-ups, stretching bars, spring balance beams and sit-up boards.

While newer equipment for fitness stations is manufactured to be tamper-resistant, you should schedule regular inspections to ensure safety and protect your investment. Some fixtures will need a new coat of paint every season, while others will merely need to be checked for damage or wear. If littering is a problem, place containers for trash and recyclables in the area.

Part of keeping facilities in good shape is being proactive. Post phone numbers so people can report problems. In short, good facilities are those that are maintained. Keep an eye on what you have, and you'll find that you can keep your bragging rights. **cg**

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