

All Access Athletics

Handicap Access to Sports Facilities

by Mary Helen Sprecher

There's a difference between a camp with facilities that are ADA-compliant, and those that are truly welcoming to individuals with physical challenges.

Make no mistake -- ADA was groundbreaking. But when it comes to truly making athletes of all challenges and all abilities a part of the game, it takes an all-out effort. And sometimes, that effort starts with reaching out to athletes who might not even know they can be athletes.

"The number of people with disabilities in the United States is in the millions," says Jeremiah Yolcut of the USTA's Competitive Play and Technical Programs division. "The number-one challenge -- what we really want to do -- is get those people involved at the grassroots level."

Any number of sports are open to those with physical disabilities; the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) which organizes the Summer and Winter Paralympic Games, can provide official information on rules, athlete classifications and more. This article will focus on a few of the athletic facilities common to many local camps, and the way those facilities -- and the sports played on them -- can be and have been adapted for recreational use by athletes with mobility restrictions.

Court Sports

Some facilities don't necessarily need to be changed to accommodate athletes who use wheelchairs. For example, wheelchair tennis uses the standard 60' x 120' court that all players use. Wheelchair basketball courts are the same dimensions as for regulation play, and the hoop is the same height as for able-bodied players. (In both tennis and basketball for wheelchair play, there are changes to the rules to allow for the limitations of players).

Opening up tennis courts, basketball courts or other facilities to wheelchair-bound players, says Yolcut, starts with opening up the gates themselves. "While it's standard for many facilities to have 42" wide gates, you want to have a wider opening for wheelchair players because of what we call the camber, or the angle in the wheels that you'll see in an athletic wheelchair. You're much more likely to go to a 48" wide opening because that means you don't have to take a wheel off the chair to get it through the gate."

The new trend in teaching tennis to ages 10 and under (both able-bodied and physically challenged) is the QuickStart Tennis Format, which uses shorter courts and softer, low-compression foam balls. Those who are learning not only the game of tennis, but getting familiar with being in a wheelchair as a whole, tend to find it a rewarding and fun experience, and have an easier time mastering the skills.

Wheelchair tennis and basketball are far from the only youth sports for those with physical challenges, however. The National Federation for State High School Associations (NFHS) High School Athletics Participation Survey lists several adapted sports, including bowling, floor

hockey, softball and track. Several park and rec districts have noted an increase in "beep baseball," a game for the visually impaired, which uses a noise-emitting ball.

Level Playing Fields

Field sports for children with mobility limitations are not the exception but the rule over at Cotting School in Lexington, Massachusetts. The school is specifically for students with special needs. Of its approximately 120 students, 40% have wheelchairs or walkers, according to president David Manzo.

"We have a fully accessible campus of 14 acres, but when I arrived, we had one hurdle left: how do you get kids in wheelchairs and walkers to play outside on a sports field? We have children in all kinds of wheelchairs, including some power chairs, which are really heavy. It just can't be done without a synthetic surface."

Cotting worked with Boston-based ASBA member Stantec Sport, which studied the students' needs and came up with a game plan for a field that would work. Stantec tested a number of different types of synthetic turf, and came up with a surface that had a shorter carpet pile (so that it would stand upright) and a higher amount of infill, which enabled athletes to move around with less resistance. All latex and rubber was removed from the carpet and the infill of the material, and instead of latex backing, contractors used thermoplastic elastomer (TPE).

The finished field is 100' x 125' -- smaller than many regulation facilities (a standard football field, for example, is 360' x 160') but perfect for Cotting's needs, since the smaller space allows for better and closer supervision of medically fragile children.

Manzo is thrilled with the results, which have included Saturday soccer and summer baseball for all those who wanted to sign up. It was, he noted, a huge step forward for students because "These are things their typically developing peers are doing. Parents, grandparents, everyone, comes out and watches the kids play."

On the Right Track

High school athletic associations are reporting an increase in requests for accommodations for wheelchair-bound athletics, meaning many of those kids will be looking for training, such as at sports camps, in the off-season.

While those who use wheelchairs are still in the minority, some high school associations are reporting an uptick in participation in track and field programs. Schools with wheelchair racing programs are starting to offer at least one throwing event (shot put, javelin, etc.) as well (athletes are referred to as 'seated throwers'). Wheelchairs are generally secured to the ground or to an immobile object for the throwing events.

According to Gary Phillips, assistant executive director at the Georgia High School Association, GHSA partnered with the American Association of Adapted Sports Programs, which helped identify and develop programs that would serve athletes who have mobility restrictions. At present, says Phillips, wheelchair athletes compete in their own division in three track and field events, the 200m, 800m and the shot put.

"We thought some kids might be better suited for short races, and some for long races," said Phillips, "and we wanted the shot as a throwing event. We divide the shot into two divisions based on the students' handicap."

Safety Issues

Many times, special needs that go beyond accessibility. Health and safety concerns should be paramount in the camp directors' mind when equipping athletic facilities.

"Something I believe is critical, yet often missed is adequate shade for temperature control," says Matt Hale of HaleCon in Bridgewater, New Jersey. "Many individuals with spinal cord or brain injuries are extremely sensitive to temperature, particularly to heat. Some can have life-threatening heat reactions which can occur with little warning. Plan as much shade as possible."

Of course, having water sources at or near the facility is a must, but so are some other things. "If possible, a cool-down area would be helpful, possibly an enclosed space attached to a bathroom facility, air-conditioned, with electric outlets and water. This space could not only provide emergency cooling, but also are a private area for suctioning. Many people with high spinal cord injuries have difficulty breathing, and often use ventilators to assist ventilation. At times, the airway can get blocked with secretions, thus creating an urgent need for suction. Proper suction would require a source for water and electric."

One more thing -- when making your camp more user-friendly to those with mobility limitations, think about having some accessible seating for spectators. The more programs you offer, the more visits you'll get from interested parents and prospects. Make them comfortable and they'll come back not as spectators, but as campers and athletes.

Note: The American Sports Builders Association (ASBA) is a non-profit association helping designers, builders, owners, operators and users understand quality sports facility construction. Info: 866-501-ASBA (2722) or www.sportsbuilders.org