

Shape Up

Managers of community associations, condos and apartments need to know what to do to keep their basketball courts and walking trails safe and usable. Here are some top tips from the pros. by Mary Helen Sprecher

Take a quick look at a brochure advertising your community. It probably mentions all the great amenities that residents will enjoy. One of those is probably the recreational facilities, like basketball courts, fitness trails and so forth.

Now ask yourself this: Are those facilities really worth bragging about?

If it has been a while since you looked at your basketball court, fitness trail or other recreational facility, take a moment to give them a quick check-up. You might be surprised what you see when you really look. Wear and tear have a way of creeping up and slowly eroding your bragging rights as a manager. Now, according to members of the American Sports Builders Association, it's time to regain those rights.

Order in the Court

Let's start with your **basketball court**. Take a good, long look. What do you see? Stains on the surface? Wear in the area around the basket? Those are signs that your court needs work.

Oh, great, you're saying. Sounds like a lot of money. Well, not necessarily. Some of that rehab can be done by your maintenance crew -- or even by a group of volunteers. The important thing is knowing which is do-it-yourself stuff, and which is don't-try-this-at-home territory.

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, you may have noticed that the surface tends to look dirty over time. Sap, sand, leaves -- they all leave their mark. Unfortunately, constant play on top of that debris tends to abrade the court itself. The good news is that you can remove those materials before they create a problem.

Keep the surface free of debris. Much can be washed off using a garden hose with a spray nozzle. Have leaves? Use a leaf blower, rather than a rake, which can put scratches on the surface. (Pressurized washers are great as well, but should only be used by an experienced operator since in the wrong hands, they can damage the court surface.)

If there are stains on the court, try scrubbing the spot(s) with a soft brush and plain warm water. If that doesn't work, move up to a gentle dish soap. If the stain is particularly stubborn, contact the manufacturer of the court coating and ask for suggestions.

If your basketball net is disintegrating, replace it. Check your backboard too, and see if it could benefit from a quick clean-up. The results can be dramatic.

If your court has fencing (either all around or behind the basket only), look for sags, bulges or rails that droop. Your maintenance crew 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 them immediately.

Surface Cracks: Cracking of asphalt is common, and can have any number of causes, some more serious than others. A sports facility professional can diagnose the problem and recommend a treatment plan. As always, say builders, the important thing is to keep an eye on the surface.

"Begin filling any cracks that appear as soon as possible," says David Marsden of Boston Tennis Court Construction Company in Hanover, MA. (For simple surface problems, there are a multitude of crack repair products on the market. Use one specifically designed for sport surfaces.)

While the surface of a basketball court is made to put up with bouncing balls, foot traffic and the occasional scuffle, it will wear down eventually. When the time comes to have a new coating and lines put on the court, say the pros, make the right choices.

"Use deeper colors such as reds since they show fewer shoe marks," says Art Tucker of Plexipave System Div. of California Products Corp. in Andover, Massachusetts. "Carefully consider the texture specified; basketball can be played in damp conditions, so 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."

If the court does need more in-depth work, says Mark Brogan of Pro-Sport Construction, Inc. in Devon, Pennsylvania, go with a contractor who 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, that is. Don't overlook the importance of good construction."

Another problem common to many public basketball courts is the fact that, well, they're public. As a result, a lot more than just basketballs go across the surface. Scooters, bikes, skateboards, dogs and more 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 facility that is gaining in popularity is the **fitness trail**. This trail may be any length, and can have a surface that runs the gamut from (on the low budget end) crusher run, to (on the upper end) a full-pour polyurethane surface, similar to a competition running track. Many trails which, budget-wise, are middle-of-the-road, will be made of asphalt or concrete. Some will have wooden or metal bridges where the trail crosses a stream or other body of water.

According to Sam Fisher of Fisher Tracks in Boone, Iowa, "many of the exercise trails are being built at 8 and 9 feet in width with the hope of being used such for running, walking, as well as bicycling."

To increase user safety, every effort should be made to keep the trail free of debris, such as leaves, pine cones and more. Keep grass cut on both sides of the trail, and cut back long

branches. If trees are near the path, keep the roots trimmed back; roots that move under the trail can push up, breaking the paved (and in some cases, rubberized) surface and causing cracks that can trip users.

While many trails (such as those made of uncoated asphalt or concrete) may be safely ploughed when snow falls, blades can damage an expensive rubberized surface, and may do more harm than good on a surface made of crusher run. (Those who have rubberized tracks and who are thinking of using an ice-melting compound, should first check with the installer of the trail to make the product sure is safe for the surface).

Training Stations: Another user-friendly amenity on such trails are **fitness stations**. These may include any number of pieces of equipment stationed along the side of fitness trails. Options might include horizontal bars (for doing pull-ups), stretching/strengthening bars, spring balance beams, sit-up boards and more. Signage provides instructions for proper use. Additional signs at the beginning and end of the trail tell individuals how to take their pulse.

While equipment on such trails is increasingly being manufactured to be tamper-resistant, it never hurts to keep an eye on it, and to keep it in good shape. Some fixtures will need a new coat of paint every season, while others will merely need to be checked for damage or wear. Because such fixtures are located on the side of the trail, any grass around or under them should be trimmed.

Part of keeping facilities in good shape is being proactive. And part of being proactive is making it easy for users to let you know about any problems. Post phone numbers for your office or maintenance personnel, should users have a concern. If littering is becoming a problem, strategically place containers for trash and/or recyclables.

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.

Note: The American Sports Builders Association (ASBA) is a non-profit association helping designers, builders, owners, operators and users understand quality sports facility construction. The ASBA sponsors informative meetings and publishes newsletters, books and technical construction guidelines for athletic facilities. Available at no charge is a listing of all publications offered by the Association, as well as the ASBA's Membership Directory. Info: 866-501-ASBA (2722) or www.sportsbuilders.org