

Winter: Time to Repair and Rejuvenate Your Track

The runners aren't running. What can you do to keep the track in shape?

By Mary Helen Sprecher

What's the best investment you can make with regard to track upkeep? Two hints: It's not expensive and you probably already have one in your office.

Give up? It's a notebook. That and a pen will help you develop a checklist to keep your track and field facility looks and perform its best.

According to the professionals who design, build and supply materials for those facilities, scheduled maintenance and constant vigilance are the keys that year after year, result in a great experience for athletes and coaches alike when they step onto a track.

"It's the small maintenance items that turn into big headaches when neglected," says Sam Fisher of Fisher Tracks, Inc. in Boone, IA.

One of the big mistakes, say track professionals, is assuming that an all-weather facility, particularly a new one, requires no attention whatsoever. And while it's true that there isn't much to be done, that doesn't absolve the owner or manager of being proactive.

"Most track surfaces are maintenance-free, meaning that the owner cannot do any real maintenance other than washing the track during the dry season and touching up numbers and triangles when the paint is worn out," says Luca Reinaudo of Mondo USA in Tega Cay, SC. "But in our opinion the emphasis should be on preventive maintenance."

Preventive maintenance should be done on a daily, weekly, monthly, seasonal and annual basis. A suggested checklist has been included with this article, but readers are encouraged to personalize it for their facilities. Not all items on the list will need to be checked off each day; however, as long as the track is in use, someone should be looking at it. Carrying a digital camera when inspecting the facility will allow photos to be sent to the track installer if there is any question about whether something needs to be addressed right away, or whether it can wait.

Problems with a track might be occurring underneath, but the first place you'll see them is the surface. Professionals recommend a regular walk-through of the facility with a special emphasis on the track itself.

"Every attempt should be made to keep the surface clean," says Lee Murray of Competition Athletic Surfaces, Inc. in Chattanooga, TN.

The surface should stay free of grass clippings, dirt, gravel and other debris. It might not hurt to have such materials resting on the track, but once athletes begin working out, the debris starts getting ground in.

According to Fisher, another culprit in surface damage is a gate that hangs too low and does not clear the track surface.

“Numerous tracks are damaged by gates that swing out into the track and, due to neglect or abuse, start dragging on the rubber. I will see owners go out and lift gates so that they can open them but never just fix the thing. Over time, the gate is literally dragged over the rubber surface and damage occurs. Most of these gates unfortunately are on the straightaway and most of the damage occurs during the football season.”

Check and make sure sprinklers for the field or surrounding landscaping are not spraying onto the track and overloading it with water.

“A super-saturated subbase is rotting the asphalt, creating a great deal of vapor pressure on the underside of the rubber surface causing bubbling and delamination,” says Fisher. “In addition, we have asphalt stripping. Lastly, there is the sheer cosmetics of the discoloration due to the hardness and mineral content of the water itself.”

Clean out drains; keep them free of grass clippings, leaves, dirt, litter and other debris that can clog them and keep them from working effectively. If you see water ponding on the track, alert the installer, as repairs may be needed.

Murray is able to tick off a number of additional proactive measures.

“Track surfaces are intended for athletes participating in running, walking or field events,” he notes. “The track surface should be restricted to no vehicular traffic of any kind. Mowing and service equipment on the track should be limited. Where access is necessary, protection should be put in place. This can be rubber matting, artificial turf, plywood, etc. Protective matting should be used where athletes other than track and field cross the track, including football, soccer and cheerleaders. Place protective mats under temporary bleachers, tables, platforms, etc. Remove mats when not in use.”

Track installers recommend athletes use soft spikes, or spikes of limited length (1/8” maximum, and pyramid-shaped, say many) in order to prevent damage. A sign stating this rule should be prominently posted.

“Seventy-five per cent of damages that we see on tracks are due to misuse of the facility, and could be avoided if appropriate signs were posted,” says Reinaudo.

Don’t overlook the field events. Check all equipment and make sure it is in good repair. Look at everything, including the sand pits, in which the sand should be level with the top of the synthetic surface.

What else? Fields should be kept in good repair. Natural grass should be kept mowed and edged (without damage to the track edges or surface). Synthetic turf, too, should be inspected and maintained. (For information on synthetic turf maintenance, see the article elsewhere in this issue).

Overall, maintenance is not a lot of work all at once but a series of small steps to keep things moving in the right direction. And as always, planning ahead and being careful are the most important things, and the most likely to have a long-term positive effect on the facility.

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 including running tracks, fields and more. 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.