

Construction Digital

(An overview of the sports facility construction industry and the vital role ASBA and its members have played through the years)

by Mary Helen Sprecher

Times were, tracks were made of cinders or shale. Ball fields were vacant lots. And tennis courts? Paved areas in parks and schoolyards, often combined with basketball nets and crisscrossed with hopscotch lines.

Unless they were made for professional competition (translation: the Olympics, Major League Baseball, the U.S. Open, etc.), many early sports facilities weren't often built to any standard. And so it might have continued, had it not been for a group of sports facility contractors who wanted to make the industry -- and the products it built -- better.

It was 1964 when the group decided there should be an organization to promulgate standards for sports facilities. They formally organized as the U.S. Tennis Court & Track Builders Association (USTC&TBA), and established construction guidelines for those two sports. Within several years, their specifications were regarded as the industry standards. The quality of facilities improved.

"The more people realized that a good facility allowed athletes to perform better, the more the demand increased," says Sam Fisher, current chairman of the association. "These days, we see high schools with track and field facilities that years ago, colleges would have died to have."

The USTC&TBA expanded, offering meetings, a membership directory and an annual awards program. It developed guidelines for sports fields as well as for indoor facilities, including field houses, gymnasiums and more.

"We keep working to educate people," says Mark Brogan, president of the association's Tennis Division. "Our members do all kinds of construction, and they keep diversifying and expanding what they do."

In 2004, the USTC&TBA changed its name to the American Sports Builders Association (ASBA), to reflect the broad scope of work performed by its members. Today, the ASBA has member companies in categories including Builder, Supplier and Professionals (architects, engineers, design professionals, etc.)

Promotion of excellence through builder certification

One of ASBA's goals is excellence in construction. The association sponsors a voluntary certification program, allowing tennis court, track and field builders to demonstrate their competency. The designations of Certified Tennis Court Builder (CTCB), Certified Track Builder (CTB) and Certified Field Builder (CFB) are available to those who have documented evidence of experience, and who can pass an examination on construction and maintenance of that particular facility.

While certification is a voluntary process, there is an increasing awareness of the program within the marketplace, and more bid documents are mandating that the chosen company have a Certified Builder on staff. (In 2008, the Association scored a major legal victory, when in a decision by the Attorney General of Massachusetts, the AG upheld the right of a school district to require that the bidder for a track project employ an ASBA Certified Track Builder).

"If you look at the quality of construction, you see that ASBA's certification has done a tremendous job of pulling up the level of construction expertise by the bootstraps," says Fisher. "You also see that these days, facilities are safer for athletes than ever before."

Information and resources to benefit the industry

The Association holds two regular meetings. Its leadership also meets with governing bodies including NCAA, IAAF, USTA and more, reviewing rules and suggesting changes to reflect current technology and best practices. ASBA's publications regarded as the industry standard include the *Construction and Maintenance Manual* series, with different volumes on tennis, tracks, fields and indoor sports surfaces.

"Something that I think the association has really helped change," says Fisher, "is that you no longer hear people say, 'Oh, I don't have a multi-million-dollar benefactor; I can't have a good facility.' They now know it doesn't cost more to build it right the first time. And that's ASBA's motto: Build it right. It helps people understand who we are and what we do."

More than 45 years after its development, the ASBA's work has helped to standardize an industry, and to encourage excellence. Sports facilities are built better, and new technologies are constantly developed to help athletes perform better. And with childhood obesity on the rise, schools, coaches, rec directors are more are recognizing that the best (and only) way to spark interest in sports is to provide an environment that is conducive to enjoyment and performance.