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Is Your School Track Open to the Public? Some Tips for Better Results

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By Mary Helen Sprecher

We've all heard the horror stories. Some of us have lived them. A public high school puts in a new track and then is besieged with requests from the neighborhood to use the facility for running and walking in the early morning or late at night when students aren't on them.

Often, the overwhelming number of requests – not to mention the constant refrain about residents' tax dollars having contributed to the track – leads to the administration simply acquiescing to the demands.



Then the trouble begins. Parents and childcare providers bringing in kids on bikes and trikes. Little ones playing in the sand pits. Users with spiked footwear. Neighborhood residents letting their dogs run around the field. And suddenly, that brand-new facility looks down at the heels, with damage to the surface, sand strewn around and a field dotted with dog waste.

It makes it really hard to be a good member of the community.

So what are some precautions that athletic directors, coaches and others can take in order to keep the damage potential down? Here are the suggestions from designers and builders of running tracks around the country:

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Creating a list of printed rules: These should be posted at the gate of the facility, as well as around it, and should include the following:

- Running shoes only (this means smooth-soled running shoes rather than footwear with spikes or cleats)
- No bikes, trikes, wagons or other vehicles (and no skates)
- No dogs in the facility (including the track, field and stands)
- Encouraging walkers/runners to alternate their use of lanes; often, individuals will gravitate toward the inside lane of the track, which leads to premature wear there.



Preventive strikes: Get locking covers for sand pits and open them only during practices and competitions. You'll save yourself the trouble of having sand not only scattered around but ground into the track surface.

Community meetings: Making the rounds of the neighborhood associations and laying down the ground rules goes a long way toward keeping tracks safe. A quick explanation of the fact that the track is easily damaged by the wrong things – wheels, spikes and so on – and a note of how much the track cost to put in – can wake people up to the potential for problems. Ask that the rules be e-mailed to community residents or posted on the community association's website in order to increase the exposure to them.

Encourage users to be stewards of the track, and to report problems with the facility – as well as users who are breaking the rules – to the school. Let people know the school cannot afford to replace the track on an ongoing basis because of user damage, and that if problems do occur, the decision to keep the facility open may be revisited. (It will be an unpopular statement, but it may create a culture of awareness when it comes to correct use.)

Media outreach: If you have a community newspaper, give the sports editor or the local reporter a call. Let him or her know about the new venue, and ask if they'd be willing to help with an article on the track itself and on proper track etiquette to keep it in good repair.

Preventing vandalism: This is a tough one. Most vandalism tends to occur during nighttime hours since criminals don't like an audience. If need be, the venue can be locked between dusk and dawn (although you may get pushback from the community members who swear the only time they can exercise is during those hours.) Facility lighting, whether constantly in use or motion-activated, can also lower the risk of vandalism.

Be proactive: Periodically visit the facility at various times it is open to the public and observe how it is being used. In addition, make it a point to do a regular walk-through at least once a week and keep an eye out for problems. It does nobody any good to wait until a problem is reported – or until it gets bad – to take action. In general, repairs are less expensive and less involved when a problem first occurs.

While few facilities are completely damage-proof (particularly when they're open to the community), taking the appropriate measures can help lower the risk for problems down the line.

Recommended reading: Running Tracks: A Construction and Maintenance Manual, available in both hard copy and electronic form from the American Sports Builders Association, by clicking [here](#).

Photo courtesy of Blair, Church & Flynn Consulting Engineers, Clovis, CA

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From New World Of Coaching

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The University of North Alabama softball team won its first national title in 2016, winning the NCAA Division II Women's College World Series, while compiling a 60-7 record on the year. Key to the team's success is Head Coach Ashley Cozart's ability to create a team culture that seamlessly blends winning and having fun.

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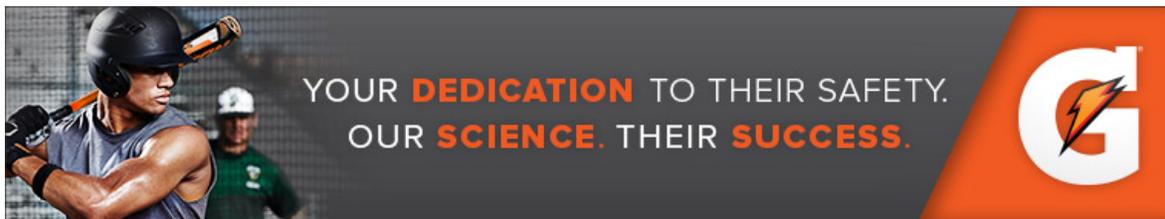
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