

Sizing Up Standards

One of the most critical aspects of risk management is knowing what the standards are for all the sports and facilities you oversee. Just as important is keeping up with them as they change.

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"Did we meet the standard?"

I have been asked that question during post-accident interviews many times.

"You don't know the standard?" That's the question I want to ask, but never do.

The purpose of this article is to talk about safety standards and standards of care. I'll also discuss guidelines and suggestions. Meeting what the profession and society consider to be the "standard of care" is important in lowering the chances of injuries to players and lawsuits against coaches.

Standards

Standards refer to the levels of performance that are expected by those with similar amounts of education and training. It reflects accepted actions as defined by society and the consensus of experts in a similar field.

In legal terms, it is called "the reasonably prudent person standard." You act in the manner that is the acceptable practice for that profession. A lawsuit attempts to prove that a person did not follow the standards expected in that field.

Standards in athletics are established based on research and input from leaders and experts in sport safety. They are published and accessible to all. For example, The

American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) offers numerous sport equipment standards that address everything from protective headgear to arrow shafts.

The standards of care for athletic administrators and coaches fall into several general categories. They include the need to:

Properly plan the activity: For example, a soccer coach does not start a scrimmage until all players are thoroughly warmed up.

Provide proper instruction: A football coach, for example, teaches athletes to tackle with their head up.

Provide a safe environment: The baseball coach does not allow some players to engage in fielding drills while others are having batting practice on the same field.

Provide proper equipment: The boys' lacrosse coach purchases only NOCSAE-approved helmets for his team because he knows that is the standard.

Properly match participants: The wrestling coach does not pair the 165-pound senior with the 110-pound freshman during a competitive drill.

Supervise the activity: The swimming coach does not allow any athlete in the pool area without a certified lifeguard present.

Warn of inherent risks: Every preseason, coaches explain any dangers of the sport to parents and participants.

Provide emergency and post-care help: An emergency care plan is developed for each athletic facility and each sport.

Note that I am talking about standards of care, not standards of practice. In determining negligence, coaches are not held to a school's normal standards of practice, but rather to what the field of athletics and our legal system considers to be the normal standards of care.

Guidelines

Following professional standards, however, can become confusing. For example, the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) basketball rule book recommends there be 10 feet of unobstructed space outside the court, but then says three or more feet is acceptable.

Which is correct? Unfortunately, there is no easy answer. The rule book is saying that three feet is the standard, while 10 feet is the recommended guideline.

A standard is a minimum, something you must follow. A guideline has some wiggle room. Still, the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, and I recommend you follow all guidelines, or at least think them through.

Sometimes, there is an alternative to a guideline for your particular school. For example, maybe your school has only one regulation-size basketball court and its end walls are five feet from the court boundaries. You probably don't want to cancel your interscholastic basketball program until you build a new gym. But you might be able to add other safety features that lessen the chance of injury, such as extra padding on the walls.

Like standards, guidelines are developed by experts in the field. A respected organization, through research and study, offers a set of guiding principles. These guidelines are usually created in answer to a problem.

For example, the United States Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) puts out

an excellent booklet titled, "Guidelines for Movable Soccer Goal Safety." These guidelines resulted from a growing number of serious injuries and deaths due to tipped goals.

Guidelines often become standards. For example, the ASTM is trying to establish standards for the use of soccer shin guards. At present they are strongly recommended. The American College of Sport Medicine wants to de-emphasize heading the ball at the youth level. This has not reached the guideline level.

Suggestions

It is critical that athletic directors know all the standards and guidelines related to the sports they oversee. They must also stay updated on any changes to standards and guidelines.

Information can be obtained from various groups. The NFHS publishes rule books and casebooks, as well as newsletters. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education publishes "National Standards for Athletic Coaches." The ASTM publishes numerous equipment standards, as well as several books. (See "Resources & Readings" at the end of this article.)

At the same time, I must admit that the increase in textbooks and articles dealing with sport safety and related laws can make the subject seem overwhelming. In addition, I have a concern that safety suggestions occasionally fall into the category of theoretical perfection. Most schools in the real world cannot reach a perfect standard of care.

Recently, I took exception to an article that suggested appropriate supervision means being able to observe and hear every individual under your charge. This is impossible. It is not the standard, guideline, or suggested definition of supervision.

This dedicated author and teacher had an admirable goal: He wanted to "raise the bar."

But I don't feel the suggestion is based in reality, and I'm afraid we may now hear this definition quoted in court.

So, what's a concerned athletic administrator to do? First of all, continue to care, and to offer programs that reach the reasonable level of safety, while always striving to improve. Inform and instruct your coaches about standards, guidelines, and suggestions from leaders in the field.

Staying informed on safety standards is not easy, and it has become a critical part of an athletic director's job. I will continue to provide advice through this column, but you should also purchase the latest textbooks--and read them. Call your state association if you have a question. Call before a problem occurs.

I don't want another athletic administrator asking me, "Did we meet the standard?"

Resources & Readings

Standards

The American College of Sports Medicine has produced the book, *Health/Fitness Facility Standards and Guidelines*, 2nd edition. It is published by Human Kinetics: (800) 747-4457.

The American Society for Testing and Materials has published several sport-specific monographs: (610) 832-9500.

The National Federation of State High School Associations produces rule books in most sports every year: (317) 972-6900.

National Standards for Athletic Coaches is published by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education: (800) 213-7193, ext. 410.

Guidelines

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, in Washington, D.C. publishes Guidelines for Movable Soccer Goal Safety and The Handbook for Public Playground Safety.

Textbooks

Appenzeller, Herb (ed.), Risk Management in Sport, Issues and Strategies, Carolina Academic Press, Durham, N.C., 1998.

Baley, James and Matthews, David L., Law and Liability in Athletics, Physical Education and Recreation, Allyn and Bacon, Inc., Boston, 1984.

Dougherty, Neil J. (ed.) Principles of Safety in Physical Education and Sport, 3rd edition, American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, Reston, Va., 2002, (800-213-7193).

Fried, Gil B., Safe at First, Carolina Academic Press, Durham, N.C., 1999.

van der Smissen, Betty, Legal Liability and Risk Management for Public and Private Entities, Anderson Publishing Co., Cincinnati, 1990.