

With A Sign

Sometimes, the simplest way to avoid an accident is with a well-worded sign. here are strategies for the where, how, and what.

By Dr. Richard P. Borkowski

Richard P. Borkowski, EdD, CMAA, is a sport safety consultant based in Narberth, Pa., and the former Director of Physical Education and Athletics at the Episcopal Academy in Merion, Pa. His most recent book, *A Risk Management Handbook for Physical Educators*, was published in September.

There are many ways to reduce injuries in an athletic program, and most of them focus on safety and common sense. Are there hazards on the playing field? Are football players being taught the correct way to tackle? Is there a certified lifeguard in the pool area?

But there is another area of risk management that has become just as important: the duty to warn. In 1985, a landmark case awarded a high school football player \$3.5 million because the school district "failed to properly warn" him about the potential of receiving a catastrophic injury.

That case established the importance of informing participants about risks, and has had far-reaching implications. A new book by respected risk management academic Herb Appenzeller reports that 80 percent of athletic lawsuits currently allege a failure to warn.

One seemingly small but important part of warning participants is the use of signage. It's a strategy that is inexpensive and simple. It is also often overlooked.

SIGNING UP

Warning signs and labels have at times gone beyond common sense. Winners of the Michigan Lawsuit Abuse Watch's annual Wacky Warning Label contest have included a warning label on the end of a fishing hook stating Harmful if Swallowed. Another one goes like this: Shin pads cannot protect any part of the body they do not cover. My personal favorite was found on a baby stroller: Remove child before folding.

In other words, you don't want to go overboard. You don't need warnings for every hazard and you don't need to post signage everywhere. Nor should you simply use the same old signs you've seen elsewhere. The best approach is to create a strategy that fits your specific program.

To start, walk around your facilities and ask yourself, "Would a sign be helpful in this area? Is there a danger participants should be aware of? Would a warning sign alert someone to a risk they might not otherwise consider? Is a reminder about a safety rule important in this particular facility?"

If your school already has some signs in place, review them with a critical eye. Do the signs have a purpose? Are they noticeable? Is the verbiage clear?

Another way to begin your sign strategy is to think through the accidents that could happen in each of your facilities, then determine whether a sign might be helpful. What are the largest risks and would a warning sign reduce them?

Last year, I was asked to review an incident involving a gym door that opened into a recently added hallway and struck an elderly woman walking to the locker room. A cautionary sign on the inside of the door or in the hallway might have prevented the accident.

SHORT & SIMPLE

Once you know what types of signs you need, it's important to come up with the correct wording. This step is key. You want the message to be clear while using the fewest words possible.

One facility I reviewed a few years ago used these words on an emergency door sign: Mobility, strength or dexterity in both arms and hands and both legs is not sufficient to perform the functions and assist others. I'm still not sure what the sign means, but it is an excellent example of wording that does not work.

A sign should be simple and straightforward. Instead of, You Must Remove Cleats Before Entering the Locker Room, I would suggest: Remove Cleats Thank You.

Many signs can have a signal word, which should be at least 50 percent larger than the rest of the words and placed at the top of the message. OSHA has designated three signal words:

Danger: This indicates immediate and serious danger. For example, Do Not Swim In An Unguarded Pool.

Warning: This indicates a potential for a major hazard. Wear Protective Eye Guards is an example at a racquetball court.

Caution: This indicates the potential for a less serious injury. A sign that reads Wrestling Shoes Only on the door to the wrestling room is an example.

THE RIGHT LOOK

There are some standard suggestions for the design of signs:

• A rectangular sign means general information.

• A triangular sign means caution.

• An eight-sided sign means danger.

• A circular sign is usually meant for a special event.

As for colors, traditionally:

• A danger sign has white letters on a red background.

• A warning sign has black letters on an orange background.

• A caution sign has black letters on a yellow background.

• A general sign has white letters on a green background.

Following these standards can be costly, and it is fine to have all your warning signs the same size, color, and layout. This is more economical and offers uniformity. (However, do note that if illustrations are used on safety signs, they must conform to international standards.)

If you choose to use signs that are uniform, the color should be eye-catching. Orange, yellow, and red are often used. The signal word should be a different color than the rest of the words.

Placement of signs is also key to making sure they are seen. Try to hang signs at eye level (most sources suggest five or six feet high) and against a plain background with no distractions. Be sure signs are placed where appropriate to the activity.

Routinely point out signage to your athletes. When they walk through the same facilities day in and out, it's easy for them to disregard things they've seen many times before.

MORE THAN WORDS

I recently watched a floor hockey game at a middle school in New Jersey. There was a sign at each end of the gym stating Eye Guards Must Be Worn For Floor Hockey. No one, including the goalkeepers, wore protective eye guards.

When I asked a teacher about the signs, he said, "They are only there for legal purposes." This logic is faulty. If your signs are just there for show, you might as well take them down.

Signage does not replace good instruction, oral warnings, or informed consent forms. But it is one more tool to help lower the risk of injuries.

COPYRIGHT