

From fields to fairways: reducing liability from errant balls

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Many of you manage facilities where sports are played such as baseball fields, golf courses, soccer fields, and multipurpose parks. While these recreational spaces provide significant community benefits, they also present a recurring liability concern such as injuries or property damage caused by errant balls leaving the fields of play. Effective risk management around errant balls is essential to reduce legal exposure, protect the public and maintain safe recreational environments.

One of the primary risks arises when balls go beyond the intended boundaries of a playing field and strike spectators, pedestrians, vehicles, or nearby property. For example, foul balls from playing baseball, mis-hit golf balls, or kicked soccer balls can easily leave a facility if proper controls are not in place. Members must recognize that while sports inherently involve risk, you still have a duty to take reasonable steps to mitigate foreseeable hazards.

A key component of risk management is facility design and layout. When planning or renovating athletic fields, members should consider field orientation, setback distances from roads and sidewalks, and the proximity of spectator areas. Placing fields so that typical ball trajectories are directed away from high-traffic areas significantly reduces exposure. In baseball complexes, orienting home plate so that the batter faces away from parking lots and walkways can reduce the likelihood of foul balls entering public spaces.

Protective infrastructure is another important measure. Installing backstops, netting, and fencing can greatly reduce the number of balls leaving a field. Higher backstops behind home plate and extended foul-line netting are particularly effective in baseball facilities where foul balls frequently reach spectator areas. Golf courses near roadways or residential neighborhoods often use protective netting or vegetative barriers to reduce the chance of stray shots causing injury or damage.

Members should also implement clear warning and communication strategies. Posted signage informing visitors that they are entering an area where balls may leave the field helps establish that some level of risk is inherent in the activity. Spectator areas should be clearly defined, and where possible, seating should be placed behind protective screening. While signage alone does not eliminate liability, it demonstrates that the agency took reasonable steps to inform and protect the public.

Operational policies and oversight further strengthen risk management efforts. Staff should inspect and monitor that safety equipment remains properly installed and maintained. Routine facility inspections are also critical. Netting, fences, and backstops can degrade over time due to weather or heavy use. Regular maintenance ensures that these protective measures remain effective.

Members may benefit from certain liability protections such as recreational use statutes and doctrines recognizing the inherent risks of sports participation and spectating. However, these protections are not absolute. Courts often evaluate whether the entity acted reasonably in addressing known hazards. Failure to install adequate barriers or ignoring prior incidents involving errant balls can weaken legal defenses.

Finally, incident tracking and data analysis can help agencies proactively manage risk. Recording when and where errant ball incidents occur allows facility managers to identify patterns and make targeted improvements such as raising fence heights, adjusting spectator seating, or installing additional netting.

Errant balls represent a manageable but important risk for members operating athletic facilities. Through thoughtful design, protective infrastructure, clear communication, consistent supervision, and ongoing evaluation, agencies can significantly reduce the likelihood of injury or property damage. A proactive approach to risk management not only limits legal exposure but also ensures that public recreation spaces remain safe and enjoyable for the entire community.

For more information, please visit the [Liability Resource Manual](#) on the WCIA website. WCIA has two resources in the Parks and Recreation section that address the issue of errant balls, PAR.02 Golf Courses & Driving Ranges and PAR.09 Ballfields. If you have any questions or need any risk management support, please contact your assigned Risk Management Representative as we are always happy to help.