

THE IMPORTANCE OF AESTHETICS IN ATHLETIC FLOORING AND COURTS

by Tim Magner

When welcoming visitors, any university wants to present its best face and offer visitors a sense of the campus and the students' school pride. You sink millions into buildings, landscaping and signage because you recognize the impression these leave, not just on visitors, but on students, staff and faculty.

Remembering the Smaller Athletic Courts

Along those lines, it's important to regularly review the state of your athletic courts—not the gleaming arena or stadium bearing the name of the founding president, but perhaps the small tennis or basketball court hidden in among the nearby residence halls. These small intramural courts may be the backbone of a student community and a source of pride for your campus, and it's important they be well maintained. Athletic courts need to be maintained, or they can become a negative.

There are two primary types of sports courts: color courts and cushioned courts. Color courts are the more modest types of courts most associated with high schools, parks and other public facilities. Color courts typically consist of an asphalt or concrete base covered with one or two coats of acrylic resurfacer and two or three coats of acrylic color. The acrylic resurfacer and some of the color coats will contain silica sand for added texture and durability.

Cushioned Courts

Cushioned acrylic courts will also start with either asphalt or concrete and the one or two coats of acrylic resurfacer. Next, however, will be three layers of coarse cushion, an acrylic coating that encapsulates small, ground up pieces of rubber. Then a transition to two or three coats of fine cushion, with slightly smaller pieces of rubber, is applied.

Like the color courts, a cushioned court will then finish with two or three coats of acrylic color and, of course, the white lines.

The key is recognizing when your courts need to be upgraded. Acrylic courts, like all courts, will wear down in time, particularly in high traffic areas along the baselines in tennis or volleyball and the key areas in basketball. As the courts wear down, you end up with a smooth, fast surface with little or no texture remaining. Footing may become slick and the ball will come off the surface differently; however, this does not happen overnight, so many of us don't recognize it until it reaches a critical point.

Naturally, courts that are used non-stop will undergo more wear and tear than courts that are used less often, but a good rule of thumb is that you want the color to be resurfaced roughly every five years and the cushion to be resurfaced every ten years.

Resurfacing Acrylic Courts

It is important to note that acrylic courts can usually be resurfaced multiple times without having to strip off the existing surface. However, all courts will eventually reach a point where the number of coats is no longer allowing sufficient vapor transmission, and bubbles or blisters may occur. While our first instinct would be to question the new surface or the contractor, in reality, bubbles are typically the culmination of multiple coats and excessive moisture, and the final coat is the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back.

Another thing to be aware of is the gradual degradation of the subbase: cracking or low spots that may develop over time in the asphalt or concrete. Some cracking over time is inevitable, particularly in certain climates and

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soil conditions, but with proper planning and maintenance, you can help extend the life span of your courts. The lifespan of a typical asphalt court is roughly 25-30 years and a typical concrete court roughly 40-50 years, depending on site conditions.

On new courts or existing courts that are still in very good shape, we strongly recommend that you consider adding saw-cuts or expansion joints to your courts, even on asphalt. Long, solid slabs, by their very nature, will be subject to the stress of natural expansion and contraction, which will ultimately present itself in the form of cracks. Saw cuts in between batteries of courts or along the net line may help you control the various stress points of your courts.

Repairing Courts with Existing Cracks

For courts with existing cracks, there are a number of repairs to consider, but the one guarantee is that the cracks will almost certainly come back in time.

The simplest and least expensive repair method is filling the cracks with an acrylic crack

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filler and resurfacing the courts, but keep in mind that this is only temporary and will need to be revisited within a year or two.

Another effective crack repair option consists of a fiberglass mesh overlay embedded into the surface coatings, but even this is only going to buy you a couple more seasons before the cracks eventually come through. Fiberglass mesh is best when the cracks are small surface cracks that are primarily cosmetic in nature. It will not be very effective with larger structural cracks.

Perhaps the most effective repair methods are the relatively new, fabric overlay systems,

designed to bridge the cracks, while allowing them to continue to expand and contract underneath. While each of these systems is slightly different, the idea is that you clean and fill the existing crack and lay the fabric system over it. The fabric is then covered with the acrylic coatings, allowing the cracks to continue to move below the fabric, but not through to the top of the surface. The main drawback is that these systems are generally the most expensive repair options, based on the total linear feet of cracks.

Extending the Life of Your Courts

If your courts are already in good shape and you want to take the small steps necessary to help keep them that way, you will most certainly extend the life of the courts. The first, most important thing to remember is to keep the court free from foreign matter, particularly outdoor courts. Leaves, dirt and other refuse should not be allowed to sit on the courts for any length of time, as they can be ground into the surface and will be more difficult to clean. They are also more likely to develop into mold or mildew.

If possible, the courts should be cleaned occasionally. Usually a standard garden hose or leaf blower is sufficient, but for mold, mildew, spills and other stains, we recommend a mild detergent, such as a basic household dish detergent. Be sure not to use any cleaners that contain abrasives, as they will mar the acrylic finish.

For stubborn stains, you can clean with TSP (tri-sodium phosphate) or a diluted household bleach solution (4 parts water/1 part bleach), but it is critical that you rinse the area thoroughly



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after cleaning and be careful around vegetation. After cleaning the court, take care to dry the surface thoroughly before playing and do not allow water to puddle.

Finally, be sure to use the right equipment. A soft nylon or hair type broom can be used for sweeping and scrubbing, but do not use any hard-bristled brushes or machines with hard scrubbers. High-pressured power washers can be used but keep it on relatively low pressure (<400psi) and avoid aiming it directly into the surface. When using machines to clean your courts, care should be taken that the wheels of the machine do not mark the surface and sharp turns should be avoided.

Standard acrylic-surface athletic courts are a versatile and inexpensive option for providing vibrant, lively athletic facilities for your campus and, as you can see, it doesn't take much to keep them in tip-top shape, contributing to a sense of community for many years.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Since 2002, Tim Magner has served as Eastern Regional Manager for DecoTurf, best known as the surface of the US Open. A graduate of Penn State University, he is a member of the American Sports Builders Association and has been published in several industry publications.

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