

**THE POLICIES AND PRACTICES OF SPORTS
GOVERNING BODIES IN RELATION TO ASSESSING
THE SAFETY OF SPORTS GROUNDS**

ABSTRACT

Sport is an important context for physical activity and it is critical that safe environments are provided for such activity. Sports safety is influenced by the presence of sports ground environmental hazards such as ground hardness, poorly maintained playing fields, surface irregularities and the presence of debris/rubbish. To reduce injury risk, sports governing bodies need to ensure regular assessment of grounds safety and the removal of identified hazards. This study describes sports ground safety guidelines and recommendations of a sample of sports governing bodies and provides recommendations for how they could be improved. Semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted with nominees of state governing bodies for Australian football, cricket, soccer and hockey. The use of matchday checklists to identify ground hazards, as mandated by insurance companies was widely promoted across all levels of play. Sports governing bodies had more direct involvement in assessing grounds used for higher level of play, than grounds used for community or junior sport. There was a general presumption that identified hazards on community grounds would be corrected by local councils or clubs before anyone played on them, but this was rarely monitored. Sports governing bodies run the risk of being negligent in their duty of care to sports participants if they do not formally monitor the implementation of their ground safety policies and guidelines. There is also further scope for sports bodies to work closely with insurers to develop ground safety assessment guidelines specific to their sport.

INTRODUCTION

Sport is an important context for physical activity and it is critical that safe environments are provided for such activity. Questions about the suitability of grounds for sports activities have risen to the fore, particularly with ongoing drought conditions in some regions. Concerns about the impact of drought conditions on turf playing surfaces are mainly associated with surface hardness and traction ¹. There is accumulating evidence that harder sports grounds, and some types of grass coverage associated with dry weather patterns, could predispose sports participants to a higher risk of injury ²⁻⁵. In the light of this evidence and public concern about ground hardness during drought conditions, sports organisations (including governing bodies, regional associations and clubs) have begun to ask questions about: the suitability and safety of their grounds; how they should go about assessing them; what they should do to address identified safety concerns; and what specific safety policies they need to develop and implement in relation to grounds. As weather patterns and climate change effects occur around the world, this is likely to become even more of a global issue. From a health promotion perspective, these changes could result in the development of unsupportive environments with the potential to impact negatively upon physical activity participation rates and community well-being ⁶.

Ground hardness is not the only potential hazard associated with sports grounds. Other sports ground environmental hazards cited as being associated with injury risk ⁷ include: exposed sprinkler heads and uncovered cricket pitches; surface unevenness; debris; type of surface, type of soil; grass/turf coverage and type; surface hardness and traction; weather conditions; playing ground surrounds and fixtures (such as goal posts). A risk management approach to assessing the suitability of grounds for sports activity must consider all of these factors and hazard assessment before play is a critical component of good sports risk management ^{7,8}. Matchday checklists have been developed to support a visual inspection of

sports fields before play is undertaken and the absence or presence of hazards are ticked-off against a set of pre-determined criteria.

A review of studies describing sports clubs' policies in relation to the inspection of the safety of sports grounds in Australia found that the majority used matchday or other checklists (range 50-100% in each study)⁹. The proportion of clubs that also assessed sports grounds before training was lower (range 25-65%), even for those that regularly checked their surfaces for the presence of physical hazards before matches.

Whilst some clubs may be undertaking risk assessments of local sports grounds, there has been no published study of the role that sports governing bodies play in setting guidelines and policies to support or encourage such practices by their member organisations or clubs. This information is needed to ensure the uptake and sustainability of injury prevention programs, including those aimed at sport safety¹⁰. It has been shown that health promotion policies and practices are more likely to be adopted, when clubs are fully informed by a lead agency¹¹. This is also true for safety policies^{12 13}. This study describes current grounds assessment policies and practices advocated by four major state-level sports governing bodies and provides recommendations for how they could be improved across all such bodies.

METHODS

A tiered structure governs formal sports delivery in Australia and this influences the policy setting context. National sports organisations and state sports associations (SSAs) largely govern international, national and professional level sport. The SSAs also have a role in overseeing delivery of broader sport participation in the community and more recreational contexts and delegate the responsibility for actual delivery of safety initiatives for community sport to regional sports associations. Whilst SSAs have a key role in setting safety and other sport policies, regional sports associations often interact directly with local clubs and set

local-level policy informed by SSA directives. The SSAs responsible for Australian football, cricket, soccer and hockey in Victoria, Australia were invited to participate in face-to-face interviews. A copy of their current policies and guidelines related to ground conditions and suitability for play was also requested.

Up to two key informants (KIs) on sports ground safety policy were identified by each SSA. The KIs were selected for their knowledge of the operation of their sport at a community level. A 30-minute semi-structured interview was conducted with each KI to explore the extent to which formal checklists were used; perceptions of the value of sports ground safety policies; and differences across levels of play. Interview recordings were transcribed and content and thematic analysis undertaken¹⁴.

RESULTS

All SSAs provided copies of their guidelines and matchday checklists that they advised all clubs and regional associations to adopt. The delineation between policies and guidelines was not clear in the material provided but there was consistency amongst the checklists provided, as they were developed by the one insurance agency. These checklists covered both field of play issues (e.g. ground surface conditions and irregularities, debris on the surface; perimeter fencing; padding of goal posts; presence of first aid staff and equipment, etc.) and change rooms and toilet safety.

Australian football

The two KIs reported high levels of ground safety checklist use, as this was a mandatory requirement of their insurer. The insurer-developed matchday checklist was required to be completed by all community clubs registered with the SSA. Whilst it was believed that there was almost 100% compliance, there was no requirement for the completed checklists to be forwarded to the relevant league, regional association or SSA. At the highest levels of sports

competition, there was a formal requirement for both competing clubs to 'sign off' on the suitability of grounds for play on the day before a match. A matchday checklist was completed and signed by team managers, team captains and the umpires confirming that the ground was safe for play and suitable for play: *"we have relocated games on the basis of the Friday reports ... to make sure the game is played on a satisfactory surface for all the players."*

Cricket

The ground safety policy required that community clubs implemented a safety inspection using a mandatory checklist produced by their insurer, before or on each day of play. Registered cricket clubs were not required to forward checklists to the SSA or to demonstrate that they had been completed. Because high performance cricket requires engagement of professional ground staff, there was a close liaison with the relevant grounds management on these matters. At the community level, a ground checklist produced by the insurer was expected to be completed and the responsibility for this was assigned to the relevant local cricket association to pass on to clubs.

Soccer

The soccer KI expected that all clubs completed a matchday checklist before each game day, as developed by their insurer and for this to be forwarded to the SSA. The KI stated: *"we have asked in the past, we asked and expected our clubs to complete a matchday checklist, but the take-up from our clubs has been extremely poor."* He went on to say: *"so we have had to change our tack and we are putting the onus and the responsibility on to the match officials. Normally they arrive a good hour and a half before the fixture and they can get around to making the necessary inspections they need to do."* This occasionally led to games being cancelled and clubs were expected to rectify certain issues.

Hockey

In relation to ground surface safety, the KI said: *‘there’s a bit of a checklist, but it is not very elaborate’*. Currently, there is a need for self-assessment guidelines to be prepared for hockey clubs: *“... to enable them to keep an eye out for the tell tale signs and to be aware of the risk factors.”*

Perceptions of the value of sports ground safety policies

For all KIs, the value of sports ground safety policies and their implementation was through matchday checklist completion to meet insurance obligations and to minimise legal risks: *“well as you know the issues of litigation are major and through consultation with our broker,”* and *“yes, it has made people aware of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in terms of risk.”* The KI from the soccer governing body indicated that the number of insurance claims for injury compensation had significantly decreased in the previous four years and felt that this was related to when the governing body had introduced mandatory ground checklists.

Differences across levels of play

For Australian football, soccer and cricket there was direct and detailed involvement by the governing bodies in ensuring suitable and safe surfaces for the higher (sub-elite) and more professional levels of the sport; these grounds were subject to exacting specifications and were expected to be monitored regularly. Community grounds were managed by local sports associations, in conjunction with the relevant local government authorities who usually owned the grounds. Although, the governing bodies provided guidelines and checklists for the assessment of sports grounds safety and suitability for play by local associations and clubs involved in lower standards of competition, they were not directly involved in their implementation.

DISCUSSION

Sports organisations, from international governing bodies through to local clubs, have a duty of care for the health and safety of their participants at all levels of play^{7 15} and to manage the risks of participation in their sport¹⁶. Sports clubs have only recently been recognised as a potential health promoting setting^{11 15} and much of the discussion has been centred on the promotion of healthy behaviours^{11 17-19} rather than adoption of safety measures for injury prevention. With regards to safety, local clubs are more likely to adopt particular safety practices and policies, if there is a state or regional governing body policy or guideline^{12 13 19}.

This present study has explored the current recommendations of a selection of governing sports bodies in relation to assessing ground conditions. The use of matchday checklists, often a mandatory insurance requirement, appears to be well accepted by these bodies and they promote them widely across all levels of their sport. These checklists identify known hazards that increase the injury risk for participants.

Whilst the sports governing bodies required matchday checklists to be completed, only the peak body for soccer required its clubs or officials to lodge these checklists centrally and was therefore able to draw conclusions about a related decline in insurance claims for injury compensation. It was assumed by other governing bodies that there was close to 100% compliance with checklist use but this could not be monitored with the current lack of central reporting processes. In all cases, insurance imperatives were a strong driver for implementing checklist processes. It is recommended that this be capitalised on as a motivator for safety improvements by all sports governing bodies and their local associations and clubs.

Overall, there was a belief that the recommendations and checklists provided by the sports governing bodies were being implemented at all levels. However, there was often no formal process in place for monitoring this. The governing bodies for both Australian football and cricket stressed that checklists cannot be too onerous as volunteers associated with clubs

were fully committed already and, whilst the people who used the checklists were experienced in their sport, there was no training provided in their correct use. The hockey organisation appeared to be in more of a development phase in relation to surface and ground safety and suitability for play. Nonetheless, the hockey KI summed up the process as *'hazards can be eliminated by good maintenance and regular monitoring.'*

It would appear that sports governing bodies have more direct involvement in the assessment of grounds at higher levels of play, than for community or junior participation. Community grounds are often the responsibility of local government authorities and sports grounds that support better standards of play, or finals, are generally regarded as showpieces and therefore allocated better maintenance and turf management regimes¹. Showpiece grounds were assessed for safety far more regularly and comprehensively than the more frequently-used community grounds. Responsibility for community grounds generally falls to regional associations, local clubs and the relevant local government authority, rather than to sports governing bodies. Nonetheless, safety guidelines and policies can be produced by governing bodies to inform local efforts^{7 12 13}.

There is a presumption that if a hazard is identified that it will be corrected or removed prior to play. However, in practice, this is unlikely to be the case and the extent to which any remedial action occurs in practice is unknown. Importantly, the use of a safety checklist is only as good as the action in response to identified issues. Most sports governing bodies reported encouraging regional associations and clubs and to use checklists to make decisions about the safety of play, but without a central lodging and monitoring of such returns, it was not possible to confirm that effective remedial actions were adopted by local associations or clubs.

This study included only four state sports governing bodies and may not be fully representative of all such bodies. However, the sports covered are the major turf users in the state of Victoria and are amongst the largest sports governing bodies. A formal audit of a

broader range of sports governing bodies would confirm the extent to which these findings can be extrapolated to sports governing bodies in other jurisdictions. It would also be of value to formally evaluate the content of the currently used checklists against real-world hazard checks to ensure that the former do cover the risks most likely to be relevant across broad-based community sports participation.

Finally, adoption of safety practices, such as these matchday checklists, is likely to require organisational change and increasing the capacity of sports clubs. Further research is needed to understand how best to achieve these in the context of sports delivery and broader safety initiatives²⁰. In particular, future research could explore the role, responsibility and responses to ground assessment by local government authorities, given their strong stake in community sporting grounds.

Recommendations for improved sports governing body practices and policies in relation to ensuring the safety of sports grounds are given in Table 1. Because of the lack of formal assessment of specific practices, these recommendations are based on common sense, rather than the demonstrated successes or failures of researched practices. These recommendations would be useful inclusions in the framework for standards for the health promoting sports clubs suggested by Kokko et al¹⁵. They should also be useful to groups interested in carrying out advocacy to improve the safety of sports grounds.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

- Peak sports bodies should establish formal ground safety assessment policies and guidelines for local clubs to use.
- Sports bodies should undertake regular assessment of the safety of their sporting grounds, across all level of play, and implement any remedial actions to remove identified hazards before play.

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Table 1: Recommendations for actions to be undertaken by sports governing bodies to ensure the safety of sports grounds

- Sports governing bodies should work closely with insurers to develop and refine suitable matchday checklists for their sports.
- Sports governing bodies should mandate that all registered clubs must conduct match day checklist assessments before every game and training session.
- Sports governing bodies should require a central lodging of all matchday checklists and regularly monitor their conduct and remedial actions adopted to address any identified hazards.
- Sports governing bodies should work with insurers to link matchday checklists with injury data, to promptly identify emerging injury issues and to demonstrate that adopted risk management approaches are effective.
- Sports associations, particularly at the local or club level, should clearly identify a person responsible for removing or controlling any hazards identified by the checklists, within an appropriate response timeline.
- Sports associations, with support from parent governing bodies, should develop ongoing training for club staff and volunteers in the use of matchday checklists for their sports.