



Guest Column

DESIGN CORNER

Taking It Outside

The Upper Fields Project at Oakland University

BY DAVE LARSON, AIA

Providing campus opportunities for fitness and wellness as part of the educational experience for students of all ages will set them on a life path that will serve them well. In his book "Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain," author John J. Ratey cites numerous examples of how exercise and fitness regimens enhance overall academic performance.

At a time when competition among universities to recruit and retain students is a real concern, fitness and wellness amenities typically rate high in a student's decision to attend a specific school. The incorporation of wellness and fitness activities as part of the total educational experience has proven not only to enhance academic performance, but to teach life lessons such as deferred gratification and learning to expand one's limits.

At Oakland University (OU) in Rochester, Mich., as with many other institutions across the country, there has been a significant spike in enrollment. In recent years, the university adopted an initiative to increase the amount of on-campus residential students, which naturally has resulted in a greater demand for recreational and intramural facilities.

Fifteen years ago, the school's recreation program did not exist as it does today. Because of the University's vision and leadership, it now has a highly regarded recreation center in addition to newly minted, state-of-the-art outdoor playing fields.

Before the recent Upper Fields project, the existing outdoor recreation amenities at OU had some deficits. Limited outdoor lighting shortened the time fields could be scheduled for use, and the natural grass suffered from overuse issues. The main soccer fields sloped 10 feet from one side to the other and the complex lacked support amenities such as toilets, event management and storage. According to Greg Jordan, director, Department



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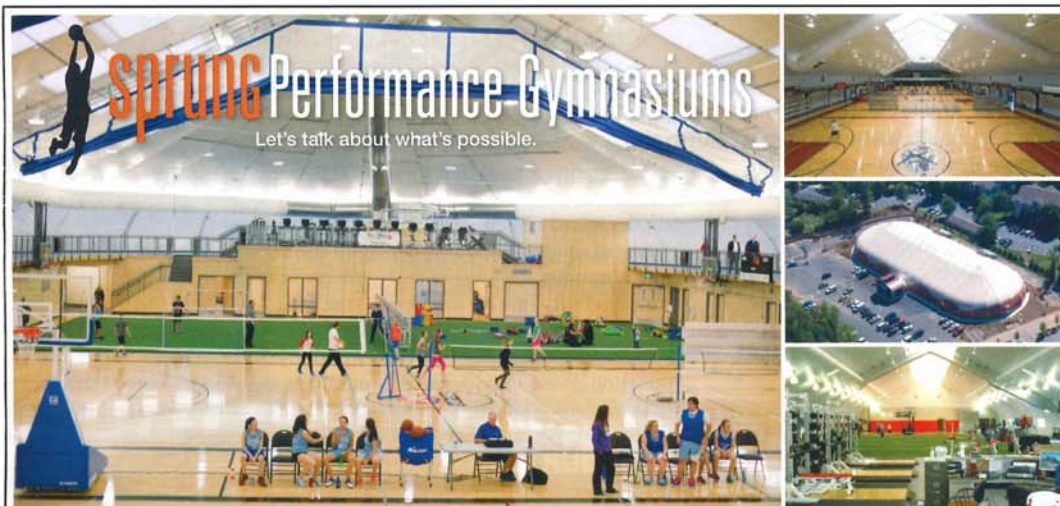
of Campus Recreation, "Our clubs sports teams were strategic in always choosing to go 'downhill' for offense in the second half of the game! More urgently, though, the condition of the old playing surface had deteriorated enough to raise serious safety concerns."

In recognition of increasing competition for the recruitment and retention of students and staff, the Upper Fields project became one of OU's highest priorities. Funding was approved by the Board of Regents and bonds were sold to build the project.

The new complex was completely regraded to provide level playing fields surfaced with artificial turf. An existing stockpile of earth from other construction projects on campus was used to correct the slope across the span of fields. This eliminated the "home field" advantage, but was the right thing to do. Artificial turf was selected to minimize maintenance and to reduce injury risk by providing a reliably consistent playing surface. "The artificial turf has allowed us to extend our playing season, both deeper into the fall, as well as earlier in the spring," Jordan said.

An additional benefit of artificial turf is the ability to drain storm water quickly to maximize play time. In order to accept large amounts of storm water without over-taxing the adjacent infrastructure, a grid of large pipes was installed below the fields to detain and to control the flow into the storm collection infrastructure at an acceptable rate of flow.

With the entire complex lighted, available use time is extended into the evening hours. The lighting is highly shielded and focused on the playing surface to minimize light spilling and glare. The field's lighting was an investment with the need for an upgraded electrical service to power



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them as well as the support building, but it has proven to be a wonderful asset. Jordan remarked, "Having all of our playfields lighted has expanded our capability of meeting student needs for both intramural and club sports play."

Additional amenities include a support building housing an office, restrooms, a concessions area and an observation deck. The complex also includes a competitive soccer field, a 400-meter track, as well as areas to support jumping and throwing field activities. The project also includes six tennis courts for the intercollegiate women's team.

The complex takes advantage of the natural terrain of the site to incorporate spectator seating for the competitive track and field area. The seats are built into the natural slope, giving the complex a more "stadium-like" image and feel.

The entire complex is conveniently located near many of the residence halls, reducing reliance on vehicles and encouraging a walkable campus. In addition, the recreation and intramural complex is part of a larger athletic complex that provides many opportunities for community outreach. Groups outside and within the university can host sports and recreation camps throughout the summer when most students are on break.

It was important, as the design team, to solicit the involvement of the project's stakeholders from the beginning to the end of the process. Their input was vital in providing a facility expressive of the priorities and goals for the program. There are thousands of decisions to be made and many of them are subjective, so it is very important for all parties to remain involved in the process. One example of this is the type, color, quantity and permanency of game lines on the fields. There are numerous permutations that can be technically correct, but not right for a specific university or municipality's program.

The new recreation and intramural facilities at OU are a strong addition to the university's infrastructure and have become an important part of the "set of tools" available to this community to enhance and nurture the learning experience. The facilities are experiencing their first full season of use with rave reviews by students, staff and community.

"Overall, the impact of developing over 10 acres of space to support student recreational sports programming has provided the means to expand offerings and improve the well-being culture of our campus," Jordan said. "Student satisfaction is elevated, which will contribute to student recruitment and retention." **RM**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a senior vice president and director of design with TMP Architecture of Bloomfield Hills, Mich., **Dave Larson, AIA**, leads the firm's efforts in the planning and design of recreation and sports projects. For more information, visit www.tmp-architecture.com.

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