

'Every Child Deserves a Place to Play'

THE NATIONAL PLAYING FIELDS ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

In a land of 57 million people (more than a quarter of the population of the USA), that would fit nearly 40 times into the USA, competition for space is keen. The United Kingdom faces a major dilemma: the need for constant new building and development and the need to protect its playing fields—and in the United Kingdom, that generally means turfgrass. With constant demands for new housing, roads, supermarkets, and car parks, the easy option has too often been a sacrifice of the nation's recreational land. But, as the humorist Mark Twain once observed: "The trouble with land is, they've stopped making it!"



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However, as is so often the way of the British, the people are fighting back. Leading the crusade against the continuing loss of playing fields is an independent charity, the National Playing Fields Association (NPFA), which was established in 1922 to protect and improve recreational land. Involved in the organization are such world-renown notables as Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, who serves as President, and NPFA Vice-President Michael Caine. Roger Moore of James Bond fame, also lends his active support to the organization.

To the NPFA, the value of physical activity among children is paramount. It believes it is essential that the habit of keeping active and fit should be formed at school age. Once children leave school, many of their games, sports, recreations, and other pastimes are forgotten, and there is little likelihood that the fitness habit will be developed in adulthood.

Surveys have led to a growing concern about the fitness of British children. One study revealed that 90 percent of children in a major provincial city were not as fit as they should be. Part of the problem comes from the fact that many of them are being denied the facilities they need to play freely and safely at school and outside of school hours.

The NPFA believes that generally, children are still keen to play games and sports, and particularly on a natural surface provided by turfgrass. However, if society makes it increasingly difficult for them to do so, they will inevitably drift more and more to passive pastimes, thus becoming less physically fit.

To counter the loss of playing fields, the NPFA carries out its protective role in a number of ways, including constant lobbying of central and local government bodies. It has had some success in persuading them of the value of one of its major planks of policy—the NPFA Six Acre Standard. Broadly, this recom-

mends that a minimum of six acres (2.43 hectares) of recreational land should be provided for every 1,000 people in the population. The NPFA also acquires land for sport, recreation, and play and at present owns 111 playing fields or open space sites. These holdings make it the largest owner of formal recreational land in the country.

The charity also promotes improvement of play fields by providing an independent advisory service on all technical aspects of outdoor recreational facilities. This includes design, layout, installation, construction, management, and maintenance and can range from advice on soil, drainage, and irrigation to floodlighting, fencing, and line marking.

The NPFA also recognizes the value of turfgrass playing and sports fields because of their increased margins of safety, cleanliness, and diversity. While not all play and sports areas can appropriately be turf-covered, the vast majority in the United Kingdom are. The reduction of injuries, both major and minor, to active participants on well maintained turf has been well documented by numerous scientific studies. The NPFA accordingly encourages not only the use of high quality turf playing areas, but also their proper management and maintenance to ensure that the quality is ongoing.

The NPFA has proven what common sense tells us and that is, if children are given a reasonable opportunity to play out of doors on a well maintained area, they will gladly do so. Also, a community which provides a mix of activities including safe and adventurous play, sport, and recreation, will benefit from healthier, more intellectually developed, imaginative children. They will grow into adults who will contribute much more to that community.

The need, not only in the United Kingdom, but around the world is urgent and underlines the relevance of the National Playing Fields Association's slogan, "Every child deserves a place to play."

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