



## Variety Village: Promoting Access and Inclusive Participation

Archie Allison, Director, Access and Awareness

Variety Village is a world-renowned sport, fitness and life skills facility for people of all ages and abilities. Beginning as a vocational school for young adults with physical disabilities in 1947, Variety Village was recognized and built as a leader in creating opportunities for people with disabilities. In 1981, Variety Village evolved as one of the only accessible sport, fitness and training facilities for children with disabilities. Today, we support 6,300 members of all ages and abilities (physical, developmental, medical, socioeconomic) as an inclusive and accessible sport, training and life skills facility.

**V**ariety Village has always been an integral part of the movement for inclusive environments and healthy active living opportunities. Community leaders from around the world join us to explore accessibility ideas and options to promote access, awareness and inclusive practices.

“Built Environment Standards” are an important initiative to create inclusive environments for people with disabilities. They present a valuable learning opportunity for individuals, communities and organizations in creating access for everyone. The proposed built environment standards address areas including parking, entrance/exits, signage, parks and trails.

### Internal Initiatives

Variety Village continues to evolve and learn to meet the needs/interests of the community. Built environment features to support our commitment to access include:

- an underground heating device on the pathway and entrance area to melt snow/ice for mobility and safety
- multiple parking areas for individuals with disabilities at the entrance of the building
- an automatic door entry to assist visitors and members
- large hallways to provide access to individuals moving in both directions simultaneously

### POSA HIGHLIGHT

Coverage from  
Cambridge, June 2010.

- spacious and unobstructed areas with high ceilings
- wheelchair accessible washroom and change areas for men, women and family
- a facility orientation for interested members and guests

### Important Considerations

The built environment should recognize and support people with disabilities to create opportunities for participation in

your programs/services. Note that it is important to also consider varied weight, height, mobility, communication and safety design in your planning.

Here are a few areas for consideration regarding the built environment in your community or facility:

1) An increase in membership creates additional needs for accessible parking.

2) Standard regulation sizes for door frames offer minimal standards only; athletes who use sport wheelchairs for training or competition may use tires cambered (for speed and agility) at 42 inches or 106.7 centimetres. In order to accommodate these individuals, door frames need to be increased to a minimum of 42-46" and should not have dividers between them.

3) Is the building/facility conveniently located and is it appealing to the senses? Sight: is it attractive/recognized as an accessible facility? Sound: are there distractions in/outside the facility like construction or competing/overshadowing structures? Smell: are there aromas from gardens, strong scented fragrances? Touch: are the wall textures rough, textured, clear of ornaments? Are there obstructions or protruding columns?

4) Is the facility built with access in mind? Does the built environment support the environment, health and safety, the needs and interests of the public, and is it built to be affordable?

### Analyze The Environment Yourself

Finally, take a few minutes to think about how you perceive your built environment and how it affects your attitude, perception and interest. If you do not have any accessibility issues, think about the challenges that may be present for those who do. The bottom line is that the built environment can determine participation in a facility or organization.

For more information on ideas for inclusive and accessible initiatives, please contact Variety Village at 416-699-7167 TTY: 416-699-8147, [www.varietylvillage.ca](http://www.varietylvillage.ca).

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Editor's Note: Archie Allison was one of the featured speakers at the recent Parks and Open Space Alliance (POSA) Summer Operational Forum addressing Accessibility in Ontario's Parks and Open Spaces.



## Wheelchair Accessible Sports Venues for Children With Disabilities

**ACCESSIBLE SPORTS VENUES** are bringing new meaning to the commonly used phrase "level the playing field." Besides incorporating the idea of fair competition, where no advantage is given to either team, these venues also level the playing field – literally – making America's favourite pastime accessible to all.

Over 100 accessible baseball fields service over 80,000 children with disabilities across the United States, including Puerto Rico. Each custom-designed field uses cushioned, rubberized turf to help prevent injuries, wheelchair-accessible dugouts, and a completely flat surface to eliminate any barriers; the bases and mounds are painted on.

"The design removes all obstructions," says Diane Alford, executive director of Miracle League, the nonprofit organization that created the first accessible field in a suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, 10 years ago.

The idea began in 1997 when a local youth baseball coach invited a disabled child who was cheering on his younger brother during games to join in. The following year, the Miracle League was formed to provide opportunities for all children to play baseball, regardless of their abilities.

### Equality in Rules

To equal the playing field, the Miracle League created new rules: every player bats once each inning; all base runners are safe; every player scores a run before the inning is over; and the last batter up gets a home run. And to make the game a community affair, local volunteers from youth groups such as Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, church groups, parents and other children team up with the players to serve as 'buddies' to assist them on the field. Finally, to ensure the game is fun rather than competitive, each team and each player wins every game.

### Leveling the Playing Field

Unfortunately, simply creating new rules of play didn't solve the accessibility challenges. "We quickly recognized that the reason most children with a disability don't participate in sports is because of the venues rather than the rules of play," says Alford. >>>



The Miracle League

After a lot of research and fundraising, including partnership with local Rotary clubs, the Miracle League found a type of rubber that would make the playing field safe, latex-free and provide the right surface for the ball to roll rather than stop, yet not bounce up and hit someone. The initial complex opened in April 2000. With 100 players from among the 50,000 children with disabilities in metro Atlanta, it soon got national attention.

### The Disability League Grows

When Lisa Kensington learned about the Miracle League through HBO's Real Sports, she immediately undertook the creation of an accessible field for her community outside of Denver, Colorado. Teaming up with Foothills Parks and Recreation, the Jason Jennings Adaptive Field opened in the spring of 2006 under the name of Sports Made Possible.

"We opted to change our name from Miracle League to Sports Made Possible to better reflect our mission," says Kensington. While Kensington has been involved with other major fundraising efforts prior to this one, she says that Sports Made Possible has been the most fulfilling project she's ever done.

"It's a win-win game for everyone involved," says Kensington. "The buddies get to build a relationship with a disabled child, and the children get to build relationships with other community members."

The Miracle League hopes to service over 1.3 million children with disabilities through 500 accessible fields by 2012. Already 40 more fields are under construction with another 50 in some stage of development.

Playing on the same grass fields and with raised mounds and bases as the other community baseball teams presented potential safety hazards – not to mention additional challenges – to blind players and those on crutches or walkers or in wheelchairs.

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