

# AS I SEE IT...



## Pay me now, pay me later

The soccer field sloped a good three feet from its southern goal mouth to its southwest corner. One of the turf experts surveying it said that if he were coach he'd "put my best left-footed kicker on the top of the hill and everybody else at the bottom."

Just down the road, the varsity football field was rutted, muddy in spots and hard. There was no way, I thought, that I'd ever play on that field—even if it meant a date with the head cheerleader.

These are real fields. Though their poor condition is a commonality, the reasons for their poor condition are radically different.

The soccer field is in a beautiful public park. There is money to improve the field; it's just been mis-appropriated by those holding the purse strings.

Taxpayers spent their park money on wonderfully modern halogen lights for the softball fields, a paved fitness trail and picnic pavilions, instead of opting to level the soccer fields. Someone—the architect, the engineer, the construction company—had simply misplaced priorities.

The football field is nestled behind a fairly large old high school. There is no money to improve the football field; no money to paint the grandstand; no money, even, to replace some of the windows in the school building. What little available money is directed toward other needed projects, like textbooks.

"If only he had some resources," one of my comrades noted, pointing at the field manager. "There's a man who loves his work, is dedicated to it. But his hands are tied." Any leftover money appropriated for landscape work is automatically diverted to the school's front lawn, where passing motorists can easily see their tax dollars at work.

What the taxpayers don't realize, however, is that when you spend money on things other than making athletic fields safe, you're flirting with disaster. That's the seven-letter type of disaster called L-A-W-S-U-I-T.

There's never been a survey done, but I'd bet that for every rutted, ill-kept athletic field in this country there exist about 15,000 attorneys, each waiting for the imminent twisted limb or broken neck that will pay for his or her next trip to Acapulco.

Insurance specialist Jim Leatzow, a frequent contributor to this magazine, agrees.

"When a kid gets hurt in a high school football game and there's a bald spot anywhere near where the accident occurred, multiple attorneys will come out of the woodwork," Leatzow notes from experience. "They allege either improper design or maintenance."

Leatzow says the quest for libel suits against the owners of athletic fields and park systems "is hot stuff." Further, he makes the point that if fields are not well designed and maintained, "they're flirting with disaster."

If this sounds serious, it is. Their message is clear for those in charge of athletic fields: "You can pay now, or you can pay later."

Jerry Roche, executive editor

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