Many Youth Soccer Leagues Still Not Getting the Message on Soccer Goal Safety

A Risk Management Report

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I. Introduction

Since the early 1990's, youth soccer associations have been given repeated warnings about the dangers of portable soccer goals by such watchdog groups as the US Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, and the Soccer Industry Council of America. Each of these groups has urged youth soccer organizations to establish guidelines and controls for using, anchoring, storing and moving soccer goals. To their credit, many national and statewide youth soccer organizations, such as the American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO) and the individual state associations of the US Youth Soccer Association (USYSA) have adopted written guidelines to address the hazards posed by portable and permanent soccer goals.

Despite the response of youth soccer organizations, incidents involving players and spectators have not diminished. Soccer organizations must do all they can to communicate these guidelines to those who are on the soccer fields. Coaches and players must be told of the potential for catastrophic injury posed by soccer goals. The coaches, in particular, need to be aware of and strictly enforce safety procedures for handling or storing portable goals.

II. Causes of Goal-related Injuries

The Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC) indicates that there are 12 million soccer players in America under the age of 18, who play soccer at least once a year. They also estimate that there are approximately 225,000 to 500,000 soccer goals in the United States. Many of these soccer goals are unsafe because they are not stable or are not properly weighted or anchored.

Injuries relating to soccer goals fall into the following categories. Most of the categories relate strictly to portable goals. Some, however, apply to both portable and stationary goals.

- Goals falling onto people who are moving the goal from one location to another
- People falling from goals while climbing or hanging from goals or nets
- Goals falling over on people who are pulling down on or climbing on crossbars
- Injuries or fatalities occurring as a result of running into goal posts
- Goals falling over as a result of high winds or wind gusts
- Cuts/abrasions resulting from sharp edges or jagged metal or wood pieces protruding from goal posts

The CPSC reports that at least 21 deaths during the period 1979-1994 were associated with movable soccer goals. According to the AAP, the mean age of the 21 subjects was 10 years old. Data from January 1993 through July 1994 documented three additional fatalities involving children killed by falling soccer goal posts (reported by the AAP from communication

with the US Consumer Product Safety Commission, April 1995), bringing the total number of reported deaths to 24. In addition, an estimated 120 injuries involving falling goals were treated each year in U.S. hospital emergency rooms during the period 1989 through 1993. The CPSC has not released any figures to show that this number has changed or decreased since 1993. According to Bollinger's claims data, there has been no appreciable reduction in goal-related claims, despite the safety guidelines that have been put in place by soccer associations.

III. Actual Claims Examples

Bollinger maintains claims data on behalf of the soccer organizations that we insure, which currently represents over 2 million youth soccer players. In the past ten years, we have seen many serious injuries resulting from soccer goals – 32 such claims altogether. A sample of these claims shows the different types of threats posed by soccer goals.

Fatalities: Bollinger has been fortunate in the past 10 years to have only one fatality to report as a direct result of contact with a soccer goal post. The consequence for this young player's family was tragic, however. In 1995, in California, a 12 year old player ran into a soccer goal post and died as a result of the traumatic impact.

Claims related to moving portable goals: Among our soccer goal claims, six are the result of moving goals.

- A 1998 claim made the national news when a 10-year-old player from Wisconsin was paralyzed from the neck down as a result of having a portable soccer goal fall on him. Maintenance workers had left the portable soccer goals at the side of the field in order to mow the grass. Later that day, the player was running drills while other players were moving one of the goals back onto the field. The movers lost control of the goal and it fell over onto the 10-year-old, injuring his neck and skull. At the last report, he was regaining some ability to move his fingers and was still breathing with the help of a ventilator.

- In a similar case, also in 1998, a boy in California suffered severe and permanent trauma to the head when he was knocked unconscious by a falling soccer goal. This player was moving the goal into place with his teammates at the time of injury.

- In 1999, a Pennsylvania boy was moving a portable soccer goal with the help of his coach and other adult volunteers. In this instance, the goal posts fell apart and struck the boy in the head. He suffered serious fractures to his face and mouth.

- Children are not the only victims when it comes to portable soccer goals. After moving the soccer goal prior to the start of a recreational game in Oregon, a team father was hanging the nets on the goal posts. The goal fell over and landed on the father's legs, fracturing several bones in his foot and ankle.

Wind Claims: Wind related claims also rank high in terms of severity of injury. These claims typically involve spectators.

- One instance in New Jersey involved a 5 year old girl who was playing in a nearby sandbox while her brother played soccer. High winds toppled the soccer goal, which

landed on the little girl and broke her femur and injured the growth plate area. These injuries are likely to have a permanent effect on her development.

- Similar happenings occurred in Pennsylvania in 1995 and in Southern California in 1997. The Pennsylvania claim is interesting in that it involved an adult spectator who was injured when the goal posts were blown over in a 20-mph wind – not an unusually strong gust of wind, according to the reports. In California, a young girl was injured while playing on her school's playground at recess when winds kicked up and blew the goal posts over. In both cases, the soccer associations were liable for damages due to their failure to properly secure the goals.

Attractive Nuisance: The attractive nuisance factor of soccer goals is the cause of many claims that are not directly related to soccer players or even to soccer activities. These claims often happen when no soccer games are being played and the goals are unattended. Children and adults like to climb on goal posts, perform stretching or warm-up exercises on them, or even use them to do pull ups or chin ups. Unfortunately, goal posts – whether portable or permanent – are not designed for these purposes and traumatic claims can be the result.

- In 1993, an 11 year old California football player showed up early for practice and was playing around with his friends on a school district's permanently installed soccer goal. He fell from the crossbar and broke his neck. The boy was paralyzed from the neck down.

- A young boy participating in a YMCA extended daycare program was playing outside and climbed on a portable soccer goal with his friends. The goal post fell over and fractured the boy's leg. The soccer association was held liable because they were responsible for maintaining the field, even though no soccer activities were going on at the time.

- In March 2000, a young Pennsylvania girl playing around a goal was knocked down when the goal fell over. She received injuries to her face, a bruised jaw and several broken teeth as a result.

Goal claims during competition: As one might expect, soccer goal claims also occur during games and practices. These are typically the result of running into the goal posts, which was the case in the fatal California incident mentioned earlier.

- Two separate, serious claims, one in 1998 and the other in 2000, both involved young players who ran into the goal posts during a game. In each case, the legal complaint stated that the goal posts should have been padded. The claimants believed that their injuries would have been greatly minimized if there were padding on the posts. Both players suffered facial injuries and broken teeth as a result of the impact.

- In 1995, a goalie from New York dove to block a shot on goal. The ball hit the side post on the goal. The goal was not commercially made, and was in poor shape. The impact of the ball caused the goal to collapse and the goalie was struck by the crossbar. She suffered serious head injuries and laceration to the scalp.

- At a soccer tournament, a player was hit in the mouth by a falling pole. Similar to the New York claim, this incident involved a flimsy, homemade goal that fell apart when the player ran into it. The player was injured by one of the posts as it fell on top of him.

Claims resulting from sharp edges or jagged pieces protruding from goals: While this category sounds less dangerous than the others, the potential for injuries is still high.

- A spectator in Northern California was watching a softball game. At some point during the game, he fell on a soccer goal on the adjacent field. The goal posts had some jagged metal pieces sticking out which seriously cut the man's neck. The lacerations were so severe that the man received over 50 stitches to close the wound.

- A New Jersey girl was playing soccer in 1998 and fell against the goal post. She cut her ear badly on the zip ties that were used to secure the nets. No reserve has been set on this claim.

IV. What can be done?

All organizations involved in soccer must take action to reduce the threat posed by soccer goal posts. Soccer Associations and their member leagues, Parks & Recreation Departments, Schools, Camps and Soccer Facilities should attack this problem from three angles:

- ➪ Establish written safety guidelines and standards for soccer goals.
- ➪ Educate coaches, league officers and referees about the dangers of soccer goals and give them the authority to enforce the safety standards.
- ➪ Communicate the safety guidelines to all members of your soccer association and your community.

V. Safety Guidelines:

A variety of sources is available for research on goal safety. The summary provided in this report is taken from the Consumer Product Safety Commission's (**www.cpsc.gov**) latest safety standards designed to reduce the risk of soccer goal hazards (May 1999).

Other organizations that have set standards for goal safety are AYSO (the American Youth Soccer Organization at **www.soccer.org)** which has an easily accessible and clearly laid out version of the CPSC's guidelines; the National Federation of State High School Associations (**www.nfhs.org);** and the National Collegiate Athletic Association (**www.ncaa.org**).

The overall body for soccer in the United States, the US Soccer Federation (**www.us-soccer.com**) uses FIFA rules for the play of soccer in this country. FIFA (the Fédération Internationale de Football Association at **www.fifa2.com**), which sets the rules worldwide for soccer, has only this to say in regard to soccer goal safety: "Goals must be anchored securely to the ground. Portable goals may only be used if they satisfy this requirement." The US Youth

Soccer Association's web site at **www.usysa.com** has no information on soccer goal safety at the time of this report.

Safety Guidelines should address (but not be limited to) the following:

- **NEVER** allow anyone to play on or climb on the net or goal framework.

- Place safety warning labels on the goal posts and crossbar. These are available from the Coalition to Promote Soccer Goal Safety, part of the Soccer Industry Council of America. Phone: 800-527-7510 or 800-334-4625. Downloadable copies of these labels are readily available on AYSO's web site at www.soccer.org.

- Always use extreme caution when moving goals. Portable soccer goals should only be moved by **adults** who are authorized and trained to do so. Allow for adequate manpower to move goals of varied sizes and weights.

- Communicate with all of your teams and leagues, and instruct players (and spectators, where feasible) of the potential dangers associated with moving or playing on portable goals. Make sure everyone involved in your organization knows of and has access to the safety guidelines for goals.

- Physical guidelines for goal posts should cover the following, whether permanent or portable:
    - ✓ Design, construction and dimensions: Make sure that the goals used by your teams and leagues conform to the standards set by the Rules of Soccer followed by your organization.
    - ✓ For portable goals, the guidelines should specify how to anchor, secure or place counterweights on the goals to prevent tipping. Some anchoring options are: Auger-style anchors; semi-permanent anchors; pegs or stakes; J-hook shaped stakes; and sandbags or counterweights.
    - ✓ Portable goals should be anchored at all times, not just when the teams are on the field. Many incidents involving goals occur at times other than when soccer is being played. Ensure that all fields used by your member teams keep portable goals anchored or secured.
    - ✓ The CPSC recommends that leagues always remove nets when games or practices are not in session.
    - ✓ Check for structural integrity and proper connecting hardware before every use. This should be the responsibility of the coaches or officials when doing a pre-game safety check of the field conditions.
    - ✓ Only use portable goals on level surfaces, to prevent additional tipping hazards.
    - ✓ Place padding on the front posts to reduce the risk of injury to players and goalies who might run into the posts. This is being debated among many soccer organizations. Some are unwilling to pad goal posts because the pads affect the way the ball hits the goal. You may want to consider padding for at least some of the leagues (recreational or younger teams) and allow the higher level or ODP teams to play without padding.

- ✓ When not in use, follow these safety guidelines for storing portable goals
  --Place goals face to face and chainlock them together
  --Lock and chain goals to a fixed structure, such as a permanent fence
  --Lock goals in a secure storage space after use
  --Fully disassemble goals for seasonal storage, if possible
  --Fold the face of the goal down and lock it to its base, if possible

VI. Education:

Once the guidelines are in place, you will need to educate your members on the prevention and awareness of the hazards associated with soccer goals. Education can take many forms, and is best done in conjunction with the next section on Communication.

- Add a Safety Information section to your organization's web site, so that all of the members and visitors to your site can read and have access to your policy on soccer goal safety.

- Work with your risk manager or insurance broker to hold seminars for your league directors and coaches on goal safety and other risk management issues.

- Hold these seminars at your annual meeting where you'll get the biggest centralized group of your members.

- Check for seminars or information on this topic at some of the national soccer shows, such as AYSO's Annual General Meeting, or USYSA's Annual Coaches Workshop. Communicate the information presented at the workshop to your membership and use it to update your association's guidelines, where applicable.

- Include field owners, school districts and other soccer facilities in your education process to help your community protect itself (and your players) from soccer goal injuries.

VII. Communication:

Written safety standards and studies on soccer injuries are good educational tools. But they are meaningless if not communicated to the right people. The message must get out to the people on the fields who come in contact with the goals: players (and their families watching the games), coaches, officials and team volunteers. There are many ways to increase awareness and prevention of soccer goal injuries within the soccer population and your community:

- Post signs or hand out flyers at registration on soccer goal safety.

- Include safety information in membership packets.

- Make use of the free soccer goal warning labels available from the Coalition to Promote Soccer Goal Safety, and ensure they are affixed to every portable goal used by your organization.

- Require that all fields used by your teams and leagues be in compliance with your soccer goal safety guidelines.

- Adding a Safety Information section to your organization's web site is not only a good educational tool, but also it may be the best way to broadcast your message to everyone involved in soccer.

- Establish a Safety Committee, if you don't have one already, to report regularly to your membership on goal safety and other important topics.

- Start a campaign in your community to educate all players and members of the local sports associations about the dangers of portable goals and the hazards of climbing on any type of goal. Remember, even though your teams may not be on the field at the time, your association could still be liable if a person gets injured on one of your goals.

VIII. Summary

Education and communication about soccer goals must be at the forefront of each association's risk management program. Making policy is a good beginning, but it will only be effective if the awareness extends out to a wide base of people. We hope that, for every child or adult who hears this message, it will mean one less tragedy in the world of soccer.

This report was prepared by Lori Windolf Crispo, CPCU, Executive Vice President of Bollinger, Inc. Bollinger has specialized in providing Amateur Sports Insurance programs for over 55 years. They currently insure over 2 million youth soccer players across the country.