White Paper B

GROUND SURFACE CONSIDERATIONS

By ACCT Standards Development Committee

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INTRODUCTION

Appendix B is a discussion of site-related issues for conducting challenge course activities, what constitutes an appropriate ground surface, and the extent to which specific activity modifications should be made. Unlike playground activities, which involve unstructured play with minimal supervision, challenge course activities are structured educational activities that should only be directed and supervised by staff with the appropriate training and background. Therefore, an impact-absorbing surface should only be considered as secondary and supplemental to other participant protection methods on either low or high challenge course elements. Primary methods for protection rely on: proper instruction, competent spotting and/or belaying, appropriate activity sequencing, and accurate group readiness assessments. Ground surfaces such as gymnasium floors, considered suitable for basketball, volleyball, and similar activities, will usually be acceptable without modification, for many common adventure curriculum activities. Other environment-specific considerations and issues are discussed below.

OUTDOOR COURSES IN TREES

Challenge course planning and building in a wooded environment requires careful consideration of site suitability and element location determination. Except for unusually clear sites, a prudent amount of site clearing and preparation will be required. The most common potential ground surface hazards include: small stumps, poisonous plants (such as poison ivy), and rocks. Stumps can usually be cut low and flat. Poisonous plants should be eradicated from approach trails and activity areas. Sites that are generally clear of rocks should be selected wherever possible; however, finding sites that are completely free of rocks is neither practical nor necessary. The goal should be to provide an appropriate natural environment, reasonably clear of potential hazards. It is unnecessary and undesirable to clear cut wooded environments, depleting naturally occurring elements.

The addition of bark mulch or wood chips spread under and around course elements is a commonly recommended procedure. Mulching can be very helpful in: protecting root systems and reducing soil compaction; promoting tree health by providing a nutrient source to trees; and providing a smoother, softer ground surface. Soft surface depth recommendations will vary with individual courses and regional quality and suitability differences in available bark mulch, wood chips or other acceptable material. Depth and material recommendations are best made by a qualified person on a case-by- case basis.

POLE COURSES

Challenge courses installed outdoors on poles are similar in many aspects to tree courses. A pole course may be installed partially or entirely on poles in a wooded environment. In these locations, maintaining healthy trees is an obvious concern, so chips and mulch should be applied as they would be on a tree course. Where pole courses are installed in open areas tree health is not an issue. These sites allow for the removal of stumps, rocks, and other hazards that may not be as easily removed from a wooded setting. Even where tree health is not an issue, wood chips or bark mulch can help provide a reasonably soft, clean ground surface in high use areas under and around elements.

INDOOR COURSES

As mentioned in the introduction, gymnasium (or other athletic facility) floor surfaces may be suitable without modification for many challenge course activities. However, as with outdoor courses, there may be cases where adding an impact-absorbing material to the floor surface is advisable. For example, placing an appropriate mat under an indoor Fidget Ladder may be considered a reasonable supplement to spotting or other techniques used for safe activity operation.