

Safety of Blacktopped School Playgrounds Debated

School Authorities Feel Supervision, Instruction Best

Alternatives Raise Other Safety Problems

Editor's note: Considerable public discussion has been heard recently about the "blacktop" surfacing now in use on parts of the playgrounds of the four Medford elementary schools. The discussion has largely been stimulated by articles which appeared in two national magazines, and in the Portland Oregonian. The writer of the following article has made something of a study of the blacktopping since his second-grade daughter broke her arm in a fall from a piece of playground equipment last fall.

By ERIC ALLEN, JR.
Mail Tribune City Editor

Youngsters are going to get hurt. No matter what safety-conscious school authorities, principals, teachers and parents can do, high-spirited school kids will continue to come home with skinned knees, bumps on the head and, occasionally, broken limbs.

These casualties can be minimized by providing the safest possible surroundings for the children, by training them in safety practices and keeping a sharp eye on their play.

The question which has arisen in Medford recently—and which has generated some pretty hot discussion—is whether or not "blacktop" or asphaltic concrete is a safe material for the playgrounds, particularly beneath playground equipment and appliances.

A group of parents maintain it is not safe, and quote recent articles on the subject to substantiate their arguments.

Other observers maintain that the blacktopped play yards are as safe—if not safer—than gravel or dirt playgrounds. Schoolmen in Medford, with some reservations, generally agree with the latter group, provided that certain safeguards are taken.

They are quick to point out, however, that if it can be conclusively shown that there is a better way of surfacing playgrounds, it will be adopted, and if any safe way is put forward to make a softer surface under equipment, that too will be considered.

They are emphatic in stating that they are not standing by the blacktopping without qualification, but have yet to be convinced that anything else is better.

What is the comparative situation regarding accidents before and after the blacktop was installed? Unfortunately, accident spot maps have been kept

only for the past two years. Before that, the records show only the name of the child and the date of accident. There is no way to determine the cause of accidents which occurred more than two years ago.

But the principals of the four elementary schools here, who should be familiar with the situation if any one is, are agreed that there has been no increase in accident incidence, and that accidents which have occurred in the past two years are no more serious than those occurring before.

In analyzing accidents which happened last year it is difficult to blame the blacktop, directly, for any of them. The principals are frank to admit the blacktop results in "expenditure of more hide"—that there is more skin lost in minor abrasions. But they feel that the hard topped surface has a tendency to minimize the seriousness of accidents, and for several reasons:

1. The blacktop eliminates uneven surfaces which are apt to trip up hurrying youngsters.

2. While abrasions, or skinned knees and elbows, are common, there is no longer the problem of sand, dirt or gravel being ground into the wound.

3. Wider use of playing fields for marbles, volleyball, basketball, and other games, draws emphasis away from the equipment, thereby making them less likely to be overcrowded—a hazard in itself.

4. Blacktop drains rapidly and readily, and can be used without danger of wetting the children immediately after a shower. Before, mud and water puddles frequently kept children confined to school buildings following a rain.

5. Children appear to be more conscious of safety precautions on blacktop than they were before, and follow elementary rules of behavior more readily than they did on dirt or gravel surfaces.

The biggest objection to blacktop has been under and around playground equipment, the swings, slides, "monkey bars," horizontal bars, merry-go-rounds and jungle gyms, which are felt to be a necessary and constructive part of every playground.

This was graphically pointed out in an article in last Sunday's Portland Oregonian, which showed a picture of two boys hanging from their knees, head-down, and another boy precariously walking on top of the monkey bars. It is true that a fall onto blacktop under such circumstances could be pretty serious—and has been in several cases in other cities, notably Los Angeles.

But it was also pointed out that any youngster caught performing such tricks would not be permitted to use the equipment again, at least for a time and until they had learned its proper use.

Alternatives so far proposed for hard surfacing under playground equipment pose as many questions—if not more—than



PLAYGROUND SCENE—Shown above is the playground at Lincoln elementary school during recess, a scene typical of any of the city's four grade schools. The picture shows the controversial "blacktop" paving, and the playground equipment. From the extreme left, the apparatus includes the "monkey bars," next a jungle gym, swings, slide, merry-go-round, and, at right, another jungle gym, which is highly popular with students at this school. Not shown are the horizontal bars, which one principal

believes perhaps should have softer material than blacktopping beneath it. During both recess periods and lunch hours one or more teachers are on hand to supervise play, and all children entering school are given instruction in elementary safety precautions, including rules of behavior on playground equipment. In the foreground can be seen markings used for various games now played on the blacktop, which could not be done on the rough gravel yards used before the paving was laid.

Mercury Now Visible

By J. HUGH PRUETT
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The little planet Mercury has inspired annual discussion in this column at about this time of year almost without fail since 1936. The reason is that many persons, even those well along in life, are not sure they have ever spotted this little messenger of the gods of ancient mythology; and further, that he flies most boldly in the western twilight at this season—and for only a comparatively few evenings in succession.

Most of the year Mercury is so nearly in the direction of the sun that he is lost in its brilliant rays. This year he is in the best position for evening observation during this present week. He will be farthest east of the sun on March 18, but is somewhat brighter at present than then. During the next few evenings our little planet will set almost 1½ hours after the sun, so the observer should begin to scan the darkening skies much earlier than this.

Mercury will be sinking into the horizon almost due west and will excel in brightness everything in the entire lower western sky with the exception of brilliant Jupiter. In fact, the two are now only five degrees apart and present a very fine combination. The separation will be slightly less as the week advances. This proximity to Jupiter will most easily point out the location of Mercury.

Now for a few astronomical facts about this shy little world.

1. Instruction. All children are made familiar with the school grounds and equipment when they first enter school, and are given definite instructions regarding their use. Primary grades, in some cases, are not allowed to use certain types of equipment.

2. Supervision. A teacher is on the playgrounds at all recess periods, and more than one are assigned during lunch hours. It is their duty to watch for improper use of equipment and to check over-enthusiastic youngsters in their play.

There are portions of each playground which are unpaved, usually with a sawdust base, which are available for children to use in rougher sports such as football. According to accident maps, mishaps are as apt to occur there as on the blacktop.

But school authorities here said if something better than the present system can be devised, they will make use of it. They have yet to be shown, however, that blacktop is basically more hazardous than other playground coverings.

1. Proper selection of equipment. Playthings called "giant strides," which were long chains attached to poles and which were used by children for swinging wide around the poles, have been discontinued as too dangerous. Other equipment has been modified or eliminated, and all now in use are approved by safety authorities. (One principal, H. W. Gustin of Jackson school, said he felt the horizontal bars should be modified, or soft material put under them.)

Mercury is the smallest of the nine principal planets, with a diameter of 3100 miles as compared with 7900 for our earth. His orbit is the nearest to the sun of any of the regular planets, and a round trip requires only 88 days compared with the year for our earth. Next out from the sun comes Venus and the earth. Because of Mercury's relatively small orbit inside the earth's path, he always appears to us in the general direction of the sun.

Mercury is best seen in the eastern dawn at certain times in the fall. The fact that he was sometimes seen in the western twilight and at other times in the dawn confused the early Greeks and caused them to believe they were viewing two different planets. They called him Mercury when an "evening star," Apollo when a "morning star."

Likely Mercury keeps one side constantly toward the sun as does our moon toward the earth. It seems that there can be little atmosphere present and that the side toward the sun is extremely torrid—hot enough to melt lead. All water would boil away. Jeans has said, "If there are rivers on Mercury, they are rivers of lead."

If clear skies prevail during the next few days, do not fail to look for Mercury as he glides down the western twilight.

Machine Planned For Translating

Seattle — (U.P.) — A machine which translates one language into another at the flick of a switch is being developed at the University of Washington.

Prof. Erwin Raffler, developer of the machine, has been awarded a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation with which to continue his work. His machine will operate in the principle of an electronic brain which can make complex mathematical calculations in seconds.

In the professor's machine, the electronic memory apparatus will be used to store the words of a translating dictionary so that a text fed into the machine will come out translated according to the dictionary definitions.

Soap jelly (1/3 cup soap dissolved in a quart of hot water, cooked until it jells) on a brush or sponge is best, say researchers of the Gas Appliance Manufacturers' association, for getting dirt up from pile surfaces and sturdy fabrics—rugs, pillow coverings, mattress ticking, etc.

Margaret Truman On Durante Show

Hollywood — (U.P.) — Margaret Truman said Saturday her delight in "making people laugh" prompted her to accept a return engagement on Jimmy Durante's "All Star Revue" television program here.

It was on Durante's show last year that Miss Truman's talents in comedy first received nationwide attention.

She is scheduled to appear on the program March 22 with Durante and Eddy Jackson and to introduce a new song, "Truman, Jackson and Durante."

Miss Truman is visiting here for two weeks while on a western concert tour.

Milk Price Ruling Set In Puget Sound Region

Seattle — (U.P.) — The Seattle Office of Price Stabilization has issued a new ruling requiring retail milk prices in the Puget Sound area be slashed whenever the cost of raw milk goes down.

The amendment, effective Thursday, also requires wholesalers to lower their prices when raw milk goes down. Previously, cost increases could be passed on to the customer, but decreases did not have to be reflected.

Retailers thus will be required to maintain the difference between costs and prices which they had on Dec. 20, 1951.

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