I was saddened to read that a Yorkshire council has changed the clothes storage systems at six of the swimming pools under its control—one being in a Sports Centre—from a basket system to coin-operated lockers. Having managed two sports centres (one with baskets, one with lockers) and having visited many pools and centres and had discussions on the ‘fors and againsts’ of both systems, I believe that the council, or more precisely the honest patrons, managers and staff of the establishments, will live to regret the decision.

I will stick my neck out and predict what will happen. I do so not with having visited Gypsy Rose Lee, but with the sickening facts of unmanned locker rooms well catalogued.

a. Despite the locker makers’ claim that their product “has been designed to provide maximum resistance to theft, vandalism and corrosion,” I say that lockers will be vandalised and patrons’ belongings stolen. I saw more human misery following the loss of personal gear in three days using lockers bearing a similar claim than I did in three years of a staff controlled basket system.

b. Many patrons will be faced with the problem of not having the correct coin to operate the locker. Result—unnecessary frustration.

c. Children, particularly those between six and ten years, will not operate the lockers correctly, thereby exposing their belongings to pilferers. Some will even leave their gear in a cubicle. Where are the staff to assist with these and other problems?

d. Keys will be lost. More vexation and frustration.

e. The staff will find great difficulty in operating sessional swims. How are the coloured bands issued in sequence and then returned?

f. Will the pool manager take the water free of charge? Who is there to check tickets? The pool attendants cannot for safety reasons. The fire doors will provide the way in.

The problems detailed will not be isolated incidents. They will occur with alarming regularity in unmanned locker rooms until eventually management will be forced to employ staff on a permanent basis, thus defeating one of the prime objectives of the exercise.

Let us then consider the Yorkshire council’s aims in making the changes.

1. “To considerably reduce the running costs of the pools and sports centres through savings in the staff required to operate them it is estimated that at least £20,000 annually will ultimately be saved throughout the 6 establishments”.

   a. The capital cost of the conversions, which must run into thousands of pounds, seems to have been quietly forgotten in these sums.

   b. An admission is made that at peak periods one person can be detached from poolside duty to check that all is in order in the locker room. Surely this figure must be two, one male, one female. But where are these staff to come from if “for reasons of economy it is necessary to keep staff levels as low as possible consistent with efficiency and safety”?

   c. A well known leisure centre can reveal that in the past 18 months damaged and faulty locks have had to be replaced at £10.00 per time. The number of locks? Six hundred. To this cost of £6,000 must be added the cost of labour in checking, removing and replacing locks.

   2. “To save space and utilise this to provide additional recreational facilities or storage accommodation”.

   This is a most attractive aim to any Manager, but I maintain that the safe custody of patrons’ belongings far outweighs the addition of a couple of table tennis tables or more storage space.

   3. “To eliminate queuing and speed the throughput of bathers in the changing rooms”.

   Again, this is a laudable aim, but personally I would prefer to wait a few minutes than to find £50 worth of clothing and gear had disappeared. This can and has happened.

   Wrong doers do not commit crimes in full view of staff. The locker system is invariably planned with quiet passages between the banks of lockers.

   Apart from staff costs the only argument I have heard against baskets is that the staff can be accused of theft, if articles are missing. As staff have master keys for lockers that argument seems to even itself out.

In conclusion I offer these two points.

1. If the main aim of the change from baskets to self-operated lockers is to reduce running costs then I suggest that the authority has adopted a very negative approach. Far better to add comparatively high income facilities to offset the losses in the pool service.

2. Even if my gloomy predictions prove wholly wrong in that no persons of ill-intent ever enter these establishments, all children operate the lockers perfectly and never lose keys, etc., I would still ask...
A popular cause of discussion is viewed from both sides, then in a third article summarised by a leading recreation figure.
In this edition the case for lockers is put in reply to Trefor Jones’ article in the last edition favouring baskets.

Trefor Jones seems to have covered all the main points in focus on this controversial subject, but has, I feel, been carried away with his own personal feelings. Perhaps I can throw in a few pertinent points to give a wider base for discussion on this subject by following Mr. Jones’ tabulated account.

a. Locker manufacturers may claim many things, rightly or wrongly, but I always feel that you get what you pay for. In these times of local authority cutbacks it is often happens that the expensive product which is required to do the job, is substituted for an inferior product simply because the cost differential is great. Added to this is the myth that lockers need not be supervised which all leads to trouble in one form or another for the operator.

b. Surely this is a management problem—change machines can be placed in the desired areas thus dispersing with the so called frustration.

c. This point is somewhat of a joint exercise between the education of the user via supervision in the early stages of the system and the proper promotion of the operation off the system.

d. Keys will be lost—of course, depending on the nature of the site and the area it is in. As for vexation and frustration, a quicker release type lock system alleviates these problems with reasonable cost replacement of single lock barrels and not the whole lock. Alternatively there is the possibility of interchanging locks in different size areas with the costs of a replacement key.

e. This is a difficult area but with education and notice the situation would improve.

f. It depends on the design of the building and the type of supervision in operation.

Mr. Jones again makes reference to the unmanned situation which I agree is a difficult area depending on the type of persons using the site. I would say that the inclusion of locker systems in existing buildings is a way of reducing staff and not eliminating them.

Mr. Jones then considers the plight of the Yorkshire council’s aims in making the changes.

1. To reduce running costs to the tune of £20,000 per year.

Has Mr. Jones considered that one-operative can cost his authority in the region of £4,000+ in total every year? The capital cost of conversion would normally be written off over 7 - 10 years so it is quite feasible for the authority to show these savings on the monies included in the revenue estimates for which there would now be a reduction. Points a and b have been covered in the Manning application and the type of locker provided.

2. To save space but utilise this to provide additional recreation facilities or storage accommodation. This can provide a lucrative extra income to the site which will feature in the cost provision and saving calculations.

3. To eliminate queuing and speed of the throughput of bathers in changing rooms. Again this seems to reflect on the unstaffed situation.

To Mr. Jones’ conclusion I would add:

1. It is not better to reduce operating costs and increase efficiency rather than reduce the impact of the service to comply with required cutbacks.

2. I think we are in business to provide the public with the best recreation opportunity within the financial budget available.

3. Sites slow to be made very attractive and a popular focus point even with this type of locker facility.

Few of us choose—most of us inherit

Harry Pollett, Administration Manager at Folkestone & District Sports Centre Trust, outlines their particular course of action.

MAKING THE BEST OF LOCKERS

I was very interested to read Trefor Jones’ article Arbitration Lockers and Baskets. Folkestone Centre has had a locker system in operation since it opened in 1972, it has proved to be a real headache until this year. We had a think about the system, looked into baskets, availability of storage, staff to cope and decided to:

1. Place all the lockers along one wall, where a quick glance from either the duty Manager, supervisor or pool attendant at irregular intervals, would show the customers that surveillance was being kept.

2. We changed our ticket machine roll for brown for swimming only.

3. We insist that all swimmers have a ticket, otherwise no admittance, and this together with the locker key is given in for a band.

4. All swimmers have a band which they collect from an area by the side of the pool, married in rotation by one lifeguard, who can watch the water and deal with bands, although dealing with bands within a cordoned off area is the responsibility for one hour in four. The band system is set up in 4 colours, and the key numbers written on the plain bands in indelible ink.

5. A change machine which takes £100 and gives 2 x 5p is situated at the entrance of Male and Female changing rooms, beside it is a 5p shampoo machine, we find that many people take 1 x 5p for a locker and buy a shampoo sachet.

That briefly is the system, it’s not foolproof, locker keys can be lost or broken, lockers can become jammed, thefts will occur, but the incidence problem has greatly diminished and we are getting close to the situation of keeping the lockers available for use at all times.

We would have preferred a basket system, but we had to make do. It can be done if a little thought is given to the problem.

We have found that the worst area for vandalism and theft is the men’s/boys’ wet area. The ladies’ wet changing room and the dry changing areas get very little abuse, so the constant security would only really worry us at our centre in one area.

Prior to introducing the new system the bands were given out by reception in colour sequence. We have a great influx of foreign students and visitors in the summer and found we were losing bands faster than Lennards could supply them.

The new bands are much cheaper, 5p each as against 16p each, and to date we have only have breakages, no losses at all. The reason: ticket and key for bands, band for key, no ticket no band, no band no key. The cost, 1000 bands x 5p, 1000 small hooks, 4 pieces of laminated board, 8 tins of enamel car spray £120 including rope to cordon off area.

Arbitration Series

There are, of course, no simple answers to the arguments raised in this series. So much depends on the facility and the community it serves. Views in favour of a certain line of action need not be without sympathy for aspects against. The third and concluding article on lockers and baskets in the next edition will attempt a summary.

If you have views on or against membership schemes and leisure centres and want to see your point of view in ARM News would like to hear from you – as this will be our next Arbitration topic.
ARBITRATION SUMMARY

Lockers v Baskets

by Roy Simons

Having been asked to take on the onerous task of summarising this highly controversial and emotive subject, I decided to research as much as possible into the present subject of clothes storage. In doing so I can only report that the majority of arguments for and against any particular system have changed little over the past two decades of discussion. As I write this, the notables differ in their present day views. However, in the strength and priority given to the reasons for recommending one system over another, there is a common agreement that we are well aware in this present day of rising inflation, drastic cut-backs in public spending and lack of respect for the property, combined with the failure of our existing systems. Every day we, as recreation managers, are seeking ways of reducing expenditure and increasing income; new projects and renovations are being shelved and even small sums of cash are not available to finance projects even where necessary. These can be shown perhaps to be the capital invested and reduce income in a relatively short period of time. Because a local authority is one of the largest single employers of manpower in any area, then it follows that the easiest way to reduce spending is to reduce labour costs. In these cases, this may be by redundancies or non-replacement of staff. This leads naturally to considering ways of introducing automation into the operation, which in the case of most clothes storage systems, especially recreation, may be considered to be impractical. In a completely honest, vandal-free and de-humanised society fully automatic systems of entry, payment, charging, clothes storage and session control would be an ideal solution. Unfortunately or fortunately, depending on one's point of view, these ideas cannot be met in the present climate and most authorities, because of vandalism, theft and general abuse are finding that the locker rooms and changing rooms need to be supervised. Whether this supervision means a full-time attendant, periodic checks by staff or closed-circuit television surveillance operated from a central control and linked to other unattended areas, is open to question.

That unique animal, the general public, within whose ranks must include ourselves, unfortunately does not know any better than to bring valuable and personal belongings with them when they visit our establishments and neither, it seems, do they realise that ultimately the cost of repairing any vandalism and damage caused could be passed on to them.

One point made abundantly clear in my enquiries is that the type of clothes storage and changing systems installed depends, to a large extent on the prevailing environment and clientele. These conditions vary markedly even across a city in that what may be ideal in one area low on the socio-economic scale may not suit a more affluent area. This is where the experienced recreation manager comes into his own in recommending a particular system. Changing facilities are one of the most important areas within a sports or leisure complex and yet in many cases they are still designed in such a way as to ignore the economics of the service and apparently provide the customer and staff with as much inconvenience as possible, inadequate, dirty, wet, dark and inconvenient changing facilities cause a customer to pre-judge the remainder of his use of otherwise satisfactory facilities. He tends to over react to any other slight annoyance or dissatisfaction to which he may be subjected.

Looking at the predominance of clothes storage systems in this country it is fairly apparent that most of the argument towards lockers systems has come about because of the failures of existing systems. These failings are still with us in some of the cheaper lockers produced today, e.g. painted ferrous metal which quickly rusts, fragile locks, thin gauge metal doors which can be easily bent and pressed open (ruining the doors in the process) and keys which can be ripped off and flat thin metal keys which can be bent and broken. With the advent of stainless steel etc., and the improved design of hinges, locks and keys some, if not all, of these problems have been eliminated. We are still, however, left with one thing that is lost keys and all the implications of lock changing. Even with the most recent development, a Nimrod locker with a new Selectric lock, one wonders how long it will take an ingenious person to duplicate the special key used for the lock. This leaves the visiting system vulnerable.

A word here on the staffing of changing areas having lockers installations and, with particular reference to the arguments the (a) "staff can be released from poolside duty at peak periods to check changing rooms and parks" and (b) "all swimmers have a band which they collect from an area by the side of the pool, manned in rotation by the lifeguard, who can watch the water and deal with the bands." At peak periods ALL attendants are required on poolside duty. One can imagine a lifeguard's remarks and the reaction generated in the press if the reaction generated in the press. In a case of a life in a swimming pool was "one of the attendants was busy checking the changing rooms" or "the lifeguard was otherwise engaged giving out bands." Where life is at risk economies cannot be made.

Let us consider the vital requirements for a satisfactory clothes storage system.

1. Customer convenience and satisfaction.
2. Financial economy within safety limits.
3. Security of clothes and valuables, changing these keys, thereby invalidating the whole system.

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3. No system can offer absolute security or freedom from accusation of theft. Articles can be lost in transit, lockers can be broken, keys can be lost, staff can be dishonest and opportunistic thieves are always around. Furthermore, imagined losses or deliberate false claims for compensation are also experienced. It would appear, therefore, where individual co-operated lockable changing cubicles are not feasible, that the need for security is best met by a system providing substantially echelon-type, vandal-proof, corrosion resistant, co-operated lockers adjacent to the changing areas where they can be readily observed by patrolling attendants or other forms of surveillance. Such a method should eliminate most of the faults with the exception of staff dishonesty since a duplicate or master key must be used in the event of lost or broken keys. Here again the method of key carrying by the customer is important and a specially designed robust key carrier would
be worth the investment. The use of a combination master key in the event of lost keys is not recommended since if this one key is lost or copied then the security of the whole system is in jeopardy. It is possible for a single duplicate keys which can be retained under the control of one designated person on each shift say the Duty Officer. Locks should be of a type which can be easily changed and, for instance, used in the female section so that if the key is subsequently found it cannot be used on the same locker and the locker also becomes immediately re-usable.

4 Obviously there must be sufficient chang- ing facilities and consequently sufficient clothes storage to accommodate the maximum number of persons at changeover or session-end periods thus avoiding queuing and loss of court or swimming time.

5 Various systems could be employed in conjunction with (4) where a large proportion of court or pool time is given over to organised groups, clubs teams or to special events. One of the easiest systems is to install lockable changing rooms with single benches and coat hooks lining the walls and with self-contained shower facilities. The team manager or other responsible person pays a deposit or signs for the key to that room and, thereby assumes responsibility for his team’s clothing and valuables. Any installation should be easy to operate and acceptable to staff and every area must also be easily accessible at all times.

Conclusion

Many elaborate and sophisticated systems of clothes storage have been conceived from hanging baskets on moving rails to simple rectangular wire baskets, polypropylene trays or even paper sacks. Some of these systems may be suitable to a particular environment in which they operate. This environment is important and may often dictate the type of system to be installed. For example, in an establishment at a coastal resort with a very high influx of casual summer visitors, the best system may be simple paper sacks, whereas a high class golf club in the heart of the London stockbroker belt, a locker system would be acceptable. Although little mention has been made of basket systems in the text so far, they should not in any way to be dismissed out of hand. Apart from the need for enough staff to operate this type of system one of the main objections to basket installations is staff accessibility. If lockers were used baskets are hidden when full and need to be lifted and transported by both customer and staff. By far the strongest objections raised by staff to a basket system are, however, those of smell (especially in hot weather) and the risk of infestation. Many centres have reported on their inability to obtain basket room staff and the reluctance of attendant staff to carry out basket room duties, even on rota.

The ideal system of combined changing and storage would appear to be that of rows of coin-operated cubicles in a single combined use area, capable of being supervised by surveillance equipment or a single attendant. Access to each cubicle should be via a “dry” entry door lockable from the inside and exiting via a “wet” door giving onto the shower and toilet area and which also gives access to the sports swimming areas. The “wet” exit door should be fitted with a combination lock and the door and partition walls of the cubicle should be vandal proof, easily cleanable, rust-proof material. On returning to a wet system is revealed both the “wet” door and the “wet” door is unlocked by the use of the key which is subsequently retained in the lock and the coin returned to the user. The person changes and exits via the “dry” door. Where finance is an obstacle all materials and equipment used must be the best available. Charging capacity must, of course, be appropriate to the maximum

average use of the building at change-over periods. Any currency as described earlier, should also be used. This system should be supported by a series of lockable team changing rooms as described previously and be linked to external doors enabling direct access to and from transport.

Coming back to the reality of the present day, there are only two main systems of clothes storage which merit detailed consideration, some arguments for and against a particular system apply equally to those alternative systems already mentioned.

These two major systems are those of hanging baskets and coin-operated lockers. In weighing up the pros and cons it is considered that any system of clothes and valuables storage which requires actual handling by staff and which the staff to operate is unsatisfactory both to customers and staff. This type of system is unduly costly in operation and, if the current rate of inflation continues, will become increasingly difficult. So to the extent that the operating cost is likely to exceed the total initial cost of the whole premises served by the system, within the lifespan of that building. Having examined both systems, and having no personal axe to grind, whilst at the same time maintaining that the old adage of “horses for courses” still applies, I am of the opinion that, if correctly designed and providing the necessary finance is available to obtain the highest quality coin-operated lockers, a locker system is the best bet in the majority of situations.