Athletic Trainer’s:

What Are They All About?

Student Two

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Sports have been around since at least 776 BC when the Greeks first held the Olympic Games. (Arnheim & Prentice, 1993, p. 2) Ever since then, athletes have been injured while participating in sports. As Greek athletes became professionals and sought to improve their performance, “the gymnastes…men [who] trained their pupils in…the rudimentary knowledge of anatomy, physiology, and dietetics appeared.” (Arnheim, 1993, p. 2) The role of the gymnastes grew and expanded until full fledged athletic trainers appeared. In this essay I will be researching contemporary athletic trainers and answering some questions that I had prior to research. What do athletic trainers actually do? How does one become an athletic trainer? Where are they employed and how much do they earn? What is the future like for this job market? What are the more emotional aspects of this job?

What Exactly Do They Do?

According to an article from Mayo Clinic: College of Sports Medicine, athletic trainers “evaluate, advise, and treat injuries of athletes and others who are physically active to assist them in recovering from injury and preventing injuries.” (Athletic training career overview, 2003) Athletic trainers are involved from the first moment when the injury takes place, providing first aid and immediate care. They are also involved in the rehabilitation and reconditioning of an athlete after the injury. Athletic trainers advise athletes on how to rehabilitate their injuries so the athletes can get back into action as quickly as possible. Trainers also attempt to prevent injuries to athletes from occurring in the first place. Athletes need to stretch before they play or practice so they do not get injured. They also condition their bodies and strengthen their muscles so injuries occur.
Athletic trainers are the ones who advise athletes on how they should stretch, warm-up, condition, and prepare before games and practices.

Educating a Future Athletic Trainer

According to the National Athletic Trainer’s Association an athletic trainer must have “a Bachelor’s Degree in athletic training… from an Accredited Athletic Training Curriculum…and be certified by the Board of Certification (BOC)” (Become an athletic trainer, 2006) Classes in athletic training are not only lecture based, but clinical experience is necessary as well. According to The University of the Pacific, “athletic training students must accumulate a minimum of 800 hours (200 hours/semester) under the direct supervision of a Certified Athletic Trainer (ATC) or other allied health care professional (e.g. physician).” The National Athletic Trainers Association says lectures and clinical work are designed to instruct in areas such as:

- Prevention of injuries and illness, assessment and evaluation of injury and illness, emergency care, therapeutic modalities, therapeutic exercise, athletic training program administration, human anatomy and physiology, exercise physiology, kinesiology and biomechanics, nutrition, psychology, pharmacology, pathology, and health care administration. (Become an athletic trainer, 2006)

A prospective athletic trainer must also pass an exam containing a written part, a simulation section, and an oral part. Also according to the Occupational Outlook Handbook, as of 2004 there were over three hundred programs accredited in athletic training in the United States. Sadly, the University of California Santa Barbara is not one of them. While three hundred colleges seems like a lot, it is in fact a very small percentage out of all of the colleges in the United States. Meaning if one wants to become
an athletic trainer there are only a small percentage of colleges to choose from. I will use myself as an example of why this is a problem. I came into college knowing I wanted to do something in the medical field but I was not sure exactly what. However through my research in this class I realized that I wanted to become an athletic trainer. It would seem that this would be no problem and I could just continue in my pursuit of my biology degree and then go into graduate school and study athletic training. However this is not as easy as it sounds. According to the National Athletic Trainer’s Association, very few colleges will accept graduate students into their athletic training program. Most colleges require that students begin their athletic training education as undergraduates. Through my research I have found out that I will need to either transfer to an accredited university or find one of the few colleges who accept graduates and apply there. I believe in the future the Board of Certification and the universities will realize that this is unfair and difficult for students and they will make some changes. Some recommended changes would for more colleges becoming certified in athletic training, or for the colleges to allow graduate students who have majors in other areas to apply for the athletic training program.

**Personal Qualities Necessary**

In addition to those scientific studies, athletic trainers need to have certain personal qualities like: “stamina and ability to adapt, dealing with burnout, empathy, sense of humor, communication, intellectual curiosity, and ethics.” (Arnheim, 1993, p. 14) Most of these personal qualities are innate and not learned through the college system, which may make it difficult for certain people to become trainers even if they study as hard as they could. Burnout is a very big problem not only among athletic
trainers but professionals in general. “Burnout is a psychological term for the experience of long-term exhaustion and diminished interest, usually in the work context.” (Burnout, wikipedia.org, 2006) Wikipedia.org also says that “health care workers are often prone to burnout. Cordes and Doherty (1993), in their study of employees within this industry, found that workers who have frequent intense or emotionally charged interactions with others are more susceptible to burnout.” (Burnout, 2006) As you will see later in this essay, being an athletic trainer is a very emotionally intense job. It makes sense then that athletic trainers are very prone to burnout. Trainers may find themselves bored with their jobs and not feeling tired of helping their athletes. Athletic trainers must realize that burnout is a possibility and know how to prepare for it and deal with it if it arises.

Employment and Earnings

In 2004 athletic trainers held about 15,000 jobs in the United States all around the country. (Occupational outlook handbook, 2006) Athletic trainers work in high schools, colleges and universities, professional sports, or clinical settings. Athletic trainers who work in high schools usually also teach classes at that level and therefore require a teaching degree. (Occupational outlook handbook) Athletic trainers usually start out interning with a certified athletic trainer. The athletic trainer has working hours much like that of the athletes in which they advise. According to Leroy Heu, Head Athletic Trainer at the University of California Santa Barbara, “Some of the most difficult situations are the long working hours and not being able to control your work schedule. Events and practices dictate your work schedule.” (Heu, personal communication, September 2006) Athletic trainers have to be on site and on call whenever the athletes are. They have to attend practices and games for most of the year and usually be with the athletes in the off-
season when they train. This could be difficult for employees who have families and do not wish to be away from them for extended periods of time. These long, unpredictable work hours will adversely affect an athletic trainer’s personal life.

The athletic trainer’s salary varies widely depending on what type of industry they are working in. The average salary in 2004 of an athletic trainer, according to Occupational Projections and Training Data (OPTD) was $33,490 per year. They classified this as “high”. However according to the Encyclopedia of Careers and Vocational Guidance “salaries for athletic trainers in high schools range from $25,000 to $35,000 per year...college trainers earn up to $45,000 to $60,000 per year, professional sports team’s trainers earn from $60,000 to $125,000 per year.” (Cortez, 2003) This means that when heading into the athletic training field a person must be aware that their salary has a huge range. They can earn anywhere from $25,000 per year to $125,000 per year. Athletic trainers must take this into account before starting their job search in the field. This will force some athletic trainers to only look for jobs in the higher ranks, like colleges or professional sports, because the pay there is highest. If most of the athletic trainers are applying for jobs in colleges and above, this will open up more positions in high schools and other lower settings. This may also increase the pay for positions in high schools as the demand grows.

The Future of the Athletic Trainer in the Job Market

The outlook for athletic trainers varies widely, like their salary, depending on what type of position they are applying for and also what type of extra skills they possess. If a trainer wants to work for a professional sports team it is going to be very difficult to
find a job as these are very competitive. (Cortez, 2003) However there are going to be a lot of job openings for athletic trainers in high schools, especially if the trainer can also teach a class like biology or physical education. Like positions at the professional level, getting positions at colleges and universities is very tough. However, according to the Occupational Projections and Training Data (OPTD), the employment change for athletic trainers is projected to be 29.3 percent from 2004 – 2014. This means that the number of athletic training jobs is projected to increase from 15,000 to 19,000 in the next 10 years. They classify the numeric increase as “very low” but the percentage increase as “very high”. This is a good sign for anyone who is in school now studying to be an athletic trainer because it is more the percentage increase that we are interested in. This is not as high of an increase as the computer science career or a couple of others but it is still a very high increase. By the time students are finished studying and are certified trainers these jobs will be open to them.

The Emotional Side of Athletic Training

With all these numbers and facts being thrown at you it is hard to remember that to be an athletic trainer is to have a very emotionally consuming job. Trainers have to watch athletes get injured very often and occasionally very severely. It is rewarding yet also very hard to rehabilitate athletes through their injuries; especially because some of them may not be successful. According to Leroy Heu one of the hardest parts of his job is “providing medical care for a seriously injured athlete that is a life threatening situation or could result in a major disability (Para or quadriplegic).” (Heu, personal communication, September 2006) People who do not like to look at injuries or blood may not be well suited for this career. Injuries can be very grotesque and gruesome.
However when one thinks of the difficult parts of this job one must also think of the best parts of the job. Heu says the most rewarding part of his job is:

The accomplishment of seeing a student athlete recovers from a serious injury and return to competition; having the opportunity to be involved with athletic teams and sports on a daily basis; most of all, assisting a student athlete in a variety of ways on the field or court athletically to helping them with personal issues and watching them graduate with their degree. (Heu, personal communication, September 2006)

Of course the pros of the job has to at least equal, if not outweigh, the cons or there would be even fewer people employed as athletic trainers. Athletic trainers do their job because they, in general, like being around sports, like to work with people, and enjoy helping athletes overcome injuries and be successful again in their sport.

My Future and What I Plan to Do

Now that I have researched this career I realize that this is in fact what I want to do in the future. However, as I have said before, I can not completely pursue my dream here at UCSB. I have emailed and communicated with both the health professions advisor here at UCSB and the advisor of athletic training at San Jose State University. From what I understand I am able to transfer to SJSU at almost any time once I have been accepted into the college and the athletic training program specifically. Once I have some time beginning next week, I hope to call San Jose State’s athletic training department so I can get a better idea of when I should transfer and what I should do in the mean time. I hope to at least finish one more year here at UCSB if not all four years and transfer after that. I suppose I could transfer now but for personal reasons I do not wish to do so. Until I
completely understand what seems to be a very complicated process of becoming an athletic trainer, I will continue my studies here and attempt to volunteer as a clinical student in the athletic training department here at UCSB.
References


