

DAY IN THE LIFE

THE WARRIOR ATHLETIC TRAINING PROGRAM

By Jaimie Siegle | Photos by Renée Fernandes



Auburn graduate assistant Gretchen Sheperty, ATC, helps correct a trainee's form during stretching and conditioning exercises.

NOW IN ITS FOURTH YEAR, the Warrior Athletic Training Program at Auburn University consists of about 10 graduate AT students, each carefully selected by program director JoEllen Sefton, PhD, ATC, and clinical coordinator Stasia Burroughs, MEd, ATC, CSCS. Like other graduate AT programs, the competitive graduate assistantship offers students tuition coverage and a monthly stipend; what makes it unique and appealing, however, is the opportunity to treat the U.S. soldiers volunteering and risking their lives to protect our country. Working closely with the Army post's physical therapists and medical personnel, the students conduct research, analyze data and provide medical care to both the young patriots and their leaders.

In late April, Sefton and Burroughs took us to Fort Benning to show us a typical day in the military setting. Although we returned to Dallas exhausted (in a good way), we were most impressed by the students' passion for their patients—and the overwhelming support of the program and the athletic training profession by the Cadre, the authority figures responsible for training the soon to be deployed soldiers.

THURSDAY, APRIL 25

0200 CST At this hour – which is sometimes referred to as “o’dark hundred” – seven graduate athletic training students from Auburn University rise way before the sun for their commute to Fort Benning, an infantry army base 47 miles away in Georgia. Fort Benning time is an hour ahead of Auburn time, so the carpooling students usually leave just before 3 a.m. to make their morning shift by 5 a.m.

0500 EST The graduate assistants report to their assigned posts at Fort Benning, which might be one of the five AT facilities inside or outdoors where physical training (“PT”) and conditioning is taking place. One GA, Theresa Everett, ATC, monitors the facility where injured and recovering trainees are going through their exercises. The soldiers follow a basic conditioning routine of stretches, cardio intervals and strength building moves like planks and squats. It’s still chilly and pitch black outside where newly admitted trainees on their second day of basic training complete a 1-1-1 assessment: one minute of push-ups, one minute of sit-ups and a one-mile run. “The first few days is the toughest,” explained Sefton. “They’re tired, scared... they don’t know what hit them.”

Erica Kendrick, ATC, is outside performing an assessment of each trainee’s running form. As they jog two at a time for about 40 yards, Kendrick watches for improper heel striking, arm swing, gait and cadence. Nine weeks later, the trainees will graduate from basic training and emerge as prepared soldiers. “At the end of the cycle they thank us, and it’s really cool to see that gratitude on their faces,” said Burroughs.

0615 EST Gretchen Sheperty, ATC, is outside watching the drill sergeants teach trainees the proper way to do pull-ups, stretches and squats. She quietly moves throughout the group, paying close attention to proper form while trying not to disrupt the drill sergeant. As we observe the trainees, Sheperty discusses the GAs’ other responsibilities, like participating in a 10-mile march alongside the trainees with a legitimate Army “assault pack” on her back. Unlike the trainees’ rucksacks, hers is filled with AT supplies. To decrease the risk for heat



Stasia Burroughs, the Warrior AT Program's clinical coordinator, and program director JoEllen Sefton work together to select 10 graduate students for the one-year program.

illness and other weather-related injuries, the marches usually begin around midnight and end around 5 a.m. She said participating in events like marches does much more than build rapport with the trainees and cadre.

“It helps us understand what they have to do,” she explained, therefore allowing the ATs to help determine risks and causes for common injuries. “It also gives us street cred with the drill sergeants.”

0645 EST We hop back into Sefton’s Jeep to travel to another AT facility within a different building on base, where both trainees and soldiers with more severe injuries go for rehabilitation. Auburn GA Drew Hester, ATC, has spent most of his time at this rehab area since August. Hester said that while he’s enjoyed learning neck, back, spine and joint mobilization techniques he might not have learned at a traditional assistantship, it’s been a challenge adjusting to the rigid schedule and the notion of being a “civilian” employee on a military base.

“Most of the cadre have been deployed, and so they’ve had experiences that have shaped the way they respond [to us]. There’s freedom you don’t get with a sports team, but you’re working under stricter guidelines and have to think outside the box to accomplish your goals.”

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0730 EST More than halfway into the morning shift, the GAs' workload begins to slow. They join the trainees for breakfast in the "dfac," short for dining facility. The GAs then complete their paperwork, recording injury notes into comprehensive spreadsheets used by Sefton, Burroughs and Fort Benning officers to get a better perspective of the injury landscape among the trainees.

The research from GA projects and data collected by the ATs has not only saved the Army potentially millions of dollars, but also a tremendous amount of time, said Lt. Col. J. Cale Brown, a battalion commander on base. "A huge difference [they've made] is the amount of time the soldiers are out of training," he said. Another invaluable feature is the education the cadre has received to help them more accurately assess their soldiers. "[They tell us] what to be or not be concerned about," he said.

Brigade Commander Col. Ronald Clark, a fervent supporter of the AT program, said he has been impressed with the contributions they've made to the fitness level of the trainees. "One of the biggest problems we see is that soldiers come here from a lifestyle that does not encourage physical fitness," Clark said, which can be a challenge due to the inherently physical nature of Army culture. "Being more physically fit means being more mentally fit and able to handle stress," he added, both essential skills which could one day save a soldier's life.

0900 EST The morning shift AT students head back to campus for class presentations, homework and group research projects. At 0200 the next day, it starts all over again. The graduate students working the afternoon shift will arrive from Auburn around lunch time. During the break between the two shifts, Burroughs and Sefton discuss the common protocols used in the military setting. "The demand of the environment creates really interesting injuries," Burroughs said. The most common types are femoral stress fractures, which are less common in more traditional athletic training settings. A unique aspect of the program is instant accessibility to MRIs, bone scans and radiology reports, which allow the GAs to make a more well-rounded assessment.

1345 EST We meet a group of trainees and their cadre in a picturesque area of the woods. Filled with obstacles reminiscent of an adult jungle gym, the "Confidence Course" is part infantry training, part team building. The young soldiers are climb ropes and maneuver their way up, down and around stacked wooden platforms. A trainee who has made his way all the way up the 20-foot rope falls to the ground with a loud thump. Burroughs and Sefton pull him aside to check for concussion symptoms and go through their usual protocol. When the three GAs for the afternoon shift arrive, they immediately disperse to each obstacle to watch for injuries. Anthony Ornello, ATC, said he's wanted



Graduate assistant Nick Parkinson, ATC, evaluates a trainee in one of the athletic training facilities.

to be an athletic trainer since junior high. Out of everything he's learned at Fort Benning thus far, he's learned there's no such thing as a 'typical' day. "Expect the unexpected," he said. "When you get an ankle sprain here, it's a good day."

This year's group of students in particular, both Sefton and Burroughs said, are some of the most hard-working, capable and motivated they've seen. "Being in the Warrior AT program is tough," said Burroughs. "You're seeing up to 75 guys a day doing eval after eval, rehab after rehab. It's an incredible clinical experience just because of the sheer volume of people.

Sefton and Burroughs said they look for "go-getters" to join their team who are able to think on their feet, improvise and adapt to change quickly. "We take only the top students, but they'll get more clinical experience here in a year than some ATs see in 10 years," Sefton said. "The grad students are a huge part of developing better protocols. From injury prevention to data tracking, we're constantly evolving," Sefton said.

Although Burroughs herself has been approached about other AT opportunities since graduating from the Warrior Athletic Training Program, she said nothing compares to her position as clinical coordinator now. "I miss the athletes, I miss the broken bones and I miss getting to sleep in, but the rewards of working with these people surpass that," Burroughs said. "I don't miss the bus trips though!" she laughed.

Sefton wholeheartedly agreed. "I have the world's coolest job," she said. §

To see a video chronicling the day we spent with the Warrior AT Program, plus other videos from different work settings, visit our Vimeo "Day in the Life" portfolio at vimeopro.com/nata1950/day-in-the-life.