

Athletic trainers

Providing healthcare for athletes of all kinds

by C. Brett Lockard

You've probably seen athletic trainers rush to help injured athletes during sporting events. But that's not all that athletic trainers do.

Athletic trainers help prevent and treat injuries for people who are physically active. Their clients include everyone from professional athletes to industrial workers. Recognized by the American Medical Association as allied health professionals, athletic trainers specialize in the prevention, assessment, immediate care, and rehabilitation of injuries that result from physical activity.

You'll learn more about the occupation of athletic trainers on the following pages. This article describes their job duties, working conditions, employment and

earnings, job outlook, training, and advancement. You'll also find suggestions for obtaining more information about the occupation.

Nature of the job

An athletic trainer's job responsibilities begin with injury prevention. This responsibility includes educating athletes and patients about what they should do to avoid putting themselves at risk for injuries. Athletic trainers also may advise people about the proper use of equipment and may apply protective devices, such as tape, bandages, and braces.

When someone is injured during a sporting event, athletic trainers are often among the first healthcare providers to arrive at the scene. Therefore, they must be able to recognize, evaluate, and assess injuries and provide immediate care when needed. Athletic trainers also are involved in treating and rehabilitating injuries.

Athletic trainers usually have frequent contact with others. In addition to working with athletes and clients, athletic trainers collaborate with physicians and other healthcare workers by discussing treatment, rehabilitation programs, injury-preventive practices, and guidelines for other health-related issues.

Physicians supervise athletic trainers' work. The level of medical supervision varies by work setting. Some athletic trainers meet with a team physician or consulting physi-



Photo courtesy of the National Athletic Trainers' Association

C. Brett Lockard is an economist in the Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections, BLS, (202) 691-5730.



cian once or twice a week; others interact with a physician every day. The extent of the physician's supervision ranges from discussing specific injuries and treatment options with the athletic trainer to directing the trainer in evaluating and treating clients.

Athletic trainers also may have administrative responsibilities. These include regular meetings with an athletic director or other administrative officer regarding budgets, purchasing, policy implementation, and other business-related issues.

Working conditions

Many athletic trainers work indoors most of the time; others, especially those in some sports-related jobs, spend much of their time working outdoors. The job also might require standing for long periods, working with medical equipment or machinery, and being able to walk, run, kneel, crouch, stoop, or crawl. Some travel may be required.

Schedules vary by work setting. Athletic trainers in nonsports settings generally have an established schedule, with nights and weekends off; the number of hours differs by employer but is usually about 40 to 50 hours per week. Athletic trainers in sports settings, however, have schedules that are longer and more variable. These trainers must be present for team practices and games, which are often in the evenings and on weekends, and their schedules can change on short notice when games and practices are rescheduled. As a result, athletic trainers in sports settings may have to work 6 or 7 days per week, including late hours, on a regular basis.

In high schools, athletic trainers who also teach may work at least 60 to 70 hours a week. In colleges and universities, athletic trainers generally work with one team, such as the women's basketball team; when that team's sport is in season, working at least 50 to 60 hours a week is not uncommon. During the off-season, a 40- to 50-

hour workweek may be normal in most settings. Athletic trainers for professional sports teams generally work the most hours per week. During training camps, practices, and competitions, they may be required to work up to 12 hours a day.

There is some stress involved in being an athletic trainer, as there is in most healthcare-related occupations. Athletic trainers are responsible for their clients' health and sometimes have to make quick decisions that could affect the health or careers of their clients. Athletic trainers also can be affected by the pressure to win that competitive sports teams experience.

Still, many athletic trainers love their jobs. Their work with teams or clients can lead to bonds of friendship and loyalty: a 2003 survey by the National Athletic Trainers' Association showed that respondents had spent about half of their athletic training careers in their current positions.

Athletic trainers who work with competitive sports teams receive recognition, such as a World Series championship ring, when their teams succeed. But even in nonsports settings, athletic trainers can have interesting experiences. For example, athletic trainers working for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration help to prepare astronauts for space travel.

Employment and earnings

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), athletic trainers held about 13,100 jobs nationwide in May 2004. Most athletic trainer jobs are related to competitive sports, but many trainers also work in nonsports settings. About 23 percent of athletic trainers were in the amusement, gambling, and recreation industry, working in fitness and recreation centers and with recreational or youth sports teams. Another 21 percent worked in colleges, universities, and professional schools. About 16 percent worked in general medical and surgical hospitals.

Other athletic trainers were employed in physicians' offices, elementary and secondary schools, performing arts companies, and professional sports industries.

Most athletic trainers work full-time and typically receive a salary and benefits. The salary of an athletic trainer depends on experience and responsibilities and varies by job setting. Median annual earnings of athletic trainers were \$33,940 in May 2004, according to BLS. The lowest earning 10 percent made less than \$20,770, and the top-earning 10 percent made more than \$53,760.

Benefits also vary. Many employers pay for some of the continuing education required of certified athletic trainers, although employers differ in the amount that they cover. Other benefits include those common to many full-time workers, such as health insurance and paid time off for vacation or illness, and those unique to the occupation, such as complimentary tickets to popular sporting events.

Job outlook

Employment of athletic trainers is projected to grow faster than the average for all occupations through 2012. Athletic trainers' increased licensure requirements and regulation have led to a greater acceptance of their role as qualified healthcare providers. Employment growth will be concentrated in health-industry settings, such as ambulatory healthcare services and physicians' offices.

Advances in technology and increasing emphasis on preventive care also are expected to increase the demand for athletic trainers. Also, as athletic trainers continue to expand their services, many employers are expected to realize the cost-effectiveness of having an athletic trainer onsite to help prevent injuries and to provide immediate treatment for injuries.

Reflecting both a concern for student-athletes' health and efforts to provide more funding for athletic training programs in schools, many new sports-related opportunities will arise from positions created in elementary and secondary schools. Some of these new positions also will include teaching responsibilities.

Most colleges, universities, professional schools, and professional sports clubs already have complete athletic trainer staffs. As a result, positions in these settings will be harder to find and more competitive.

Turnover among athletic trainers is limited. Because of this, most openings are projected to come from job growth rather than from the need to replace workers who

leave the occupation permanently. For athletic trainers working with sports teams, turnover is especially low because many athletic trainers prefer to work with the same coaches, administrators, and players.

The occupation is expected to continue changing over the 2002-12 decade as athletic trainers take on more administrative responsibilities, adapt to new technology, and work with larger populations. Jobseekers who are able to adapt to such changes will face the best prospects.

Qualifications, training, and advancement

Because athletic trainers deal directly with a variety of people, they need good social and communication skills. They should be able to manage difficult situations and the stress associated with them—for example, when disagreements arise with coaches, clients, or parents regarding suggested treatment. Athletic trainers also should be organized, be able to manage time wisely, be inquisitive, and have a strong desire to help people.

Last year, there were more than 200 accredited bachelor's degree programs in athletic training. Students in these programs are educated both in the classroom and in clinical settings. Formal education includes many science and health-related courses, such as human anatomy, physiology, nutrition, and biomechanics.

A bachelor's degree from an accredited athletic trainer program is part of the requirement for becoming certified by the Board of Certification. In addition,



Athletic trainers work under the supervision of a physician.

Like others who provide healthcare, athletic trainers work with an aging population.

a successful candidate for board certification must pass an examination that includes written questions and practical applications. Athletic trainers must continue taking medical-related courses and adhere to a code of ethics to maintain certification. In the 43 States with athletic trainer licensure or registration or both, board certification is required.

According to the National Athletic Trainers' Association, 70 percent of certified athletic trainers have a master's or doctoral degree. Athletic trainers may need a master's or higher degree to apply for some positions, especially those in colleges and universities, and to increase their advancement opportunities. And because some positions in high schools involve teaching along with athletic trainer responsibilities, a teaching certificate or license could be required.

There are a number of ways in which athletic trainers can advance or move into related positions. Assistant athletic trainers may become head athletic trainers and, eventually, athletic directors. Athletic trainers might also enter a group practice and assume a management role. Some athletic trainers move into sales positions, using their athletic trainer expertise to sell medical and athletic equipment.

For more information

Visit your local library or career counselor's office to learn more about athletic trainers. In addition to researching the occupation, look into the industries in which athletic trainers are employed.

Detailed employment and earnings data on athletic trainers are available from BLS. For the most recent national estimates and industry, State, and metropolitan area profiles, see the athletic trainer occupational profile online at www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes299091.htm.

Some occupations are similar to athletic trainers in their focus on physical fitness. These occupations include fitness trainers, personal trainers, aerobics instructors, fitness directors, and athletes, coaches, umpires, and related workers.

Related occupations that focus on healthcare include emergency medical technicians and paramedics, physi-



cal therapists, physician assistants, registered nurses, licensed practical and licensed vocational nurses, recreational therapists, occupational therapists, and respiratory therapists.

Two BLS publications, the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* and the *Career Guide to Industries*, provide information about these and other occupations and the industries that employ them. The *Handbook* describes the job duties, training, earnings, employment, outlook, and more for nearly 300 occupations. The *Career Guide* is arranged similarly to describe more than 40 industries. Both are available at many libraries and career counseling offices and also online: the *Handbook* at www.bls.gov/oco/home.htm and the *Career Guide* at www.bls.gov/oco/cg/home.htm.

There are also opportunities for certified athletic trainers to serve in the military, although the military does not classify them as athletic trainers. Enlisted personnel and officers who are certified athletic trainers are usually placed in another program, such as health education.

For more information about careers in athletic training, contact:

National Athletic Trainers' Association
2952 Stemmons Freeway, Suite 200
Dallas, TX 75247
(214) 637-6282
www.nata.org

For more information about athletic trainer certification, contact:

Board of Certification, Inc.
4223 S. 143rd Circle
Omaha, NE 68137
(402) 559-0091
www.bocatc.org