

DRIVING PUBLIC Awareness

NATA's At Your Own Risk initiative advocates for the profession

By Tina Berres Filipski

Reducing the risk of injuries to athletes is a priority among athletic trainers in all settings. But many people outside the profession don't know this nor about other essential skills these athlete safety experts provide.

To remedy this lack of knowledge and understanding, in 2016, NATA launched one of its most ambitious programs to date aimed at key stakeholders. At Your Own Risk is a public awareness campaign designed to educate athletes, parents/guardians, school administrators, legislators and employers on the ways athletic trainers are vital to safety and prevention, and how they mitigate injury and risk on and off the field, stage, warehouse floor or other space. The intent of the campaign was to educate and inform stakeholders but the hope was to also create ambassadors for the athletic training profession and for causes they champion. A third purpose was to help athletic trainers advocate for their own profession.

Why This Initiative? Why Now?

Driving the new campaign forward was its mission: To educate, provide resources and equip the public to act and advocate for safety in work, life and sport.

These four project goals created the framework:

1. Educate the public on who athletic trainers are, what they do and where they work.
2. Educate the public on the value athletic trainers bring to the health care team.
3. Educate employers on how to hire an athletic trainer.
4. Advocate for the profession in each state.

The timing of the campaign's launch seven years ago was intentional to support one of NATA's 2016 strategic objectives: advocate for athletic trainers by influencing public opinion and policy, and building support for and protecting the image of the athletic training profession and NATA.

Today, the staff-driven initiative supports three out of five goals in the new NATA Strategic Plan, launched in January, particularly Goal 3: Elevate understanding of and regard for the comprehensive skill set of athletic trainers.

So Many Stakeholders. Where To Begin?

Contrary to popular belief, only 2% of athletic trainers are employed in professional sports. The other 98% work in a broad variety of settings, including secondary schools, universities, youth leagues, hospitals and private practice, the performing arts, sports medicine and fitness clinics, occupational health departments in commercial settings, public safety departments and the armed forces. Each setting has its own educational needs that At Your Own Risk needed to address. Therefore, it was decided to roll out a tiered program in phases to strategically communicate with each key stakeholder group based on what was important to them. But where to start?

Considering that only 37% of public high schools have a full-time athletic trainer, secondary schools were identified as an immediate need and the first target audience.

Developing Key Resources and Tools

Gearing up for the launch was no small feat for NATA's external marketing team, whose staff began by developing a dedicated public-facing website, www.atyourownrisk.org, with specific resources that targeted the needs of stakeholders at secondary schools, including

parents/guardians, athletic directors, principals and legislators.

Among the many marketing tools used initially was the Share Your Story campaign, a series of videos featuring athletes, coaches, physicians and others – including Mark Cuban and the late Kobe Bryant – who shared their personal experiences about the value of athletic trainers in their own lives. The series was one of the first important building blocks of At Your Own Risk.

Following a strong launch, the campaign gained momentum and was expanded to include on-site events. In 2018, the first live event, Prepare to Play, was held in New Orleans for area youth. The daylong program taught youth and their parents about health and safety, promoted general wellness and advocated for athletic trainers in all areas of work, life and sports.

In 2019, NATA added #ATsinAction, www.nata.org/atsinaction, an outreach campaign focused on collecting photos of athletic trainers in action that could be used by NATA and on At Your Own Risk's social media channels. #ATsinAction showcases athletic trainers doing what they do best. The campaign was soft-launched to NATA committees early that year and the online web form was added before year end.

A year later, NATA held its second Prepare to Play event in Kansas City, Missouri. The Kansas City Chiefs' athletic training staff and 15 athletic trainers from the University of Kansas Health System put on a sports safety and wellness camp for 150 fourth- to eighth-grade Girl Scouts and their parents. The athletic trainers taught the girls about CPR and the importance of locating an AED for treating sudden cardiac arrest and put them through warm-up and stretching exercises to prevent overuse injuries, among other activities.

Growth Means Change and New Resources

In 2022, the At Your Own Risk website was redesigned to make it easier to use, and added resources for additional stakeholder groups, including occupational health, physician and private practice, rural and urban hospitals and clinics, police and fire departments, armed forces and performing

arts as well as untapped opportunities at the collegiate level. The website also included more tools for employers. One of the new sections outlines the steps needed to hire an athletic trainer and includes job descriptions for positions in a variety of settings.

Visitors to the redesigned website will also find:

- Useful infographics
- Shareable images with facts, statistics and quotes about prevention and safety
- A blog with articles on timely and important health topics
- An interactive state statistics map that shows all 50 states' sports safety information including recommended sports safety policy implementation, number of Safe Sports School Awards, athletic training licensure/regulation status and the percentage of high schools with a full-time athletic trainer.

Also last year, the NATA team introduced a new e-newsletter, *The AT Champion*, featuring timely articles and other information to support the mission and goals of At Your Own Risk.

Promotion and Results

Getting the word out to various audiences about the redesigned website relied on the broad reach of a social media campaign, along with a new promotional video and live announcements at the annual NATA Clinical Symposia & AT Expo and Joint Committee Meeting to inform members, leadership and committees.

The extra effort to overhaul the website and promote the upgrades has paid off in a big way. Website data comparing March 2023 to March 2022 indicates that the number of current users to the site has almost doubled (9,828 versus 5,258) as has new users (9,414 versus 4,976).

Benefiting Stakeholders and the Profession

Although each of the target audiences has its own needs, they share an important concern: reducing risk – risk of injury, risk of lawsuits and risk of lost profit, among others.

As part of the campaign, the website has statistics showcasing the importance of

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employing athletic trainers and the difference they make in a variety of environments.

For example, a ballet company reduced its work compensation claims by \$20,000 after employing an athletic trainer for two years. Armed forces researchers reported that injuries have been reduced 55% when prevention programs are implemented.

It's facts like these that catch the eyes and ears of stakeholders and alert more organizations to the benefits of adding athletic trainers to their teams. As intended when At Your Own Risk was launched, the streamlined resources and powerful tools on the website make it easy for athletic trainers to use this campaign to advocate for their profession at local, state, district and national levels.

"One of the ways we used **atyourown-risk.org** recently was to educate employers on the various ways of hiring an athletic trainer," said Gina Hethcock, NATA external marketing manager. "During the release of the NATA Member Statement: The State of Employment for Athletic Training, **www.nata.org/blog/beth-sitzler/state-employment-athletic-training**, the page was promoted as a resource to employers. NATA members are able to visit that page and promote it or add it to their advocacy toolbox when promoting the profession and speaking to potential employers."

The website's well-packaged information makes it easy to access valuable takeaways for use during Capitol Hill Day, career days, Q&A with parents in schools and with other audiences needing insight about the merits of athletic trainers.

Jennifer Rheeling, MS, ATC, an athletic trainer for the Washington, D.C., public school system and NATA Secondary School Athletic Training Committee chair, who has provided input and direction on content to the NATA external marketing team, frequently refers others to the website.

"For example, there's an athletic director of a public charter school in Washington, D.C., who has been using it," Rheeling said.

"She's been trying to convince the school to get two athletic trainers, so she's been using it for reference and resources."

That athletic director, Kendra Williams, recently presented her case to her board members, CEO and president using information she found on the At Your Own Risk website.

"Right now, we contract out our athletic trainers, so I had to make a statement of why they need to be in schools full time," said Williams, who has been working on the project for three months.

She found everything she needed on the At Your Own Risk website, including a job description, salary information and help in asking the right questions in the interviews.

"The site was very easy to use," she said. "Everything links to more info and people I can contact, if needed – that helped me because when you are putting together a presentation like this, it's hard to look through a bunch of stuff and still not find the answer. So, I could pick up the phone if I needed to. NATA has been really helpful."

What's Next for At Your Own Risk

Now in its seventh year, At Your Own Risk will continue expanding to stay robust as needs change.

"We are hoping to have more content on the website in the future," said Hannah Hill, NATA senior external marketing coordinator, adding that the marketing team is already working on adding a story submission process. "We often have folks asking how they can help, and we're always looking for content on various health conditions and the athletic trainer's role in safety and prevention."

Although At Your Own Risk is a staff-led initiative, ongoing contributions from NATA members have been vital to building the wealth of resources it now offers.

"The [website] redesign would not have been possible without the contributions of various committees and NATA members," Hethcock said. "The 'How to Hire an AT' section is an example of the teamwork it took to update the site. Thank you to all who were involved."

NATA members can stay up to date on additions to At Your Own Risk by following the initiative on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram at **@ASaferApproach**. 