

BLASE HAS A BLAST CARING FOR THE HAWKS

The Atlanta Hawks head athletic trainer gives us a peek into the professional basketball setting

By Jaimie Siegle

Photos by Renée Fernandes/NATA

The Atlanta Hawks' athletic training facility at Philips Arena consists of the standard equipment — raised platform seating for the athletes, two whirlpools, an electronic icing and compression device, hampers full of towels and cabinets full of more sports medicine supplies. As assistant ATs Pete Radulovic, ATC, and Alessandro Oliveira, ATC, prep for treatments before the night's game, a tall Wally Blase, MS, ATC, CSCS, strides into his office casually dressed in black basketball sweatpants and a black shirt. Later, he'll change into a dark tailored suit and slick back his hair for the game.

With more than 1,000 games under his belt with the Atlanta Hawks, Blase is very comfortable in Philips Arena. He has been the Hawks' head athletic trainer since 2000, meaning he has been with the organization longer than most, with the exception of assistant athletic trainer Radulovic, who has Blase beat by a few years. Inside the office he shares with Radulovic, Blase's desk features a bulletin board boasting photos of a young Wally sandwiched between Dennis Rodman and Carmen Electra, a prized photo with Michael Jordan and several professional awards, including his 2012 Ed Lacerte Outstanding Service Award. Blase has accumulated a wealth of great stories in

his nearly 20-year career in the NBA setting, from locker room conversations with Michael Jordan to living with Dennis Rodman for a few weeks as he recovered from an injury. "Dennis is the hardest working guy I know!" Blase said. "Didn't matter how late he was out the night before, he always woke me up."

Blase grew up a diehard Chicago Bears fan in Niles, Ill. and studied sports medicine at Winona State University in Minnesota, a school with 22 collegiate sports and only one AT. He became immersed in the hands-on nature of the job and was especially fascinated with the mechanical aspect of athletic training. Blase worked three summer internships with the Bears before realizing



the professional basketball setting was his true calling. He met Chicago Bulls Head AT Robert “Chip” Schaefer, MA, ATC, PES, who taught Blase everything about working in the NBA. “I didn’t have anywhere else to go, so I went to practice,” Blase said, laughing. Schaefer encouraged him to attend graduate school to study sports psychology, as Schaefer himself had done. Blase completed his master’s degree at Syracuse University and returned to work for the Bulls. He worked under Fred Tedeschi, ATC, a tech-savvy athletic trainer whose mentorship helped “round out” Blase’s skills. He worked as an assistant athletic trainer for the Chicago Bulls for four years under Schaefer and was part of two NBA Championship-winning teams before coming to Atlanta in 2000. That year, multiple head AT positions opened up in the NBA, including the Atlanta Hawks. Blase already thought highly of the Hawks organization; plus he grew tired of the Midwestern cold. “It was nice to be able to see the sun in February,” he said.

Blase said working with professional basketball is much different from professional football. He remembered the hectic schedules and frigid temperatures he endured on the Chicago Bears’ sidelines, as opposed to the temperature-controlled arenas in the NBA. Although the role of an NBA athletic trainer requires a rigid schedule and a major time commitment — “We play 82 games; it’s a marathon, not a sprint,” Blase said — his responsibilities have become increasingly administrative, since he is responsible for maintaining player statistics and injury reports with coaches, owners and sometimes the GM twice a day. He also files worker’s compensation paperwork for athletes who become injured on the job, records every pill taken by an athlete into the medication log, faxes and emails game statistics and works with Radulovic

to identify the best treatment protocol for any given athlete, from massage therapy to time in the cryochamber. The office duties have begun to take up more of Blase’s day over the years, forcing him to rely on his two associates to handle many of the day-to-day responsibilities. Radulovic primarily does the manual treatment, Blase said, praising his longtime partner’s skills. “I’m just OK,” he admitted jokingly.



Over the years, the Hawks owners, coach and GM have become increasingly supportive of the sports medicine team, realizing the value of proper injury prevention, treatment and rehabilitation. The team employs a handful of rotating massage therapists as additional experts who can offer a second opinion. The Hawks have a lot of voices weighing in on most decisions, but Blase has earned their respect and is a trusted voice to the management team.

“Be able to listen, but also stand your ground,” Blase advised other professionals who may disagree with their manager’s policy or decisions. It was in this manner that he gained the respect of Michael Jordan — by not feeling intimidated and standing by his opinions. Jordan poked fun at Blase’s love for hockey, and Blase joked about Jordan’s infatuation with baseball. Described by Blase as “the all-around greatest locker room guy ever” and the “ultimate guy’s guy,” Jordan’s presence seemed to warrant respect. (Case in point: In the AT facility before Bulls games, Jordan was always the last one to get taped.) “That’s just the way it was,” Blase remembered.

During his time with the Hawks, Blase has developed a genuine bond with and love for the team. “I like the athletes,” he said about his reason for staying in professional basketball. “I treat them like they’re my little brothers,” said the 42-year-old. “They’re the nicest guys in the world.” Blase enjoys the camaraderie, and the fact that barriers like race and religion don’t exist on the team. He also enjoys the psychological aspect and helping the athletes overcoming their own obstacles, injury-related or not. “I’m their school nurse and I’m their mom,” he laughed.

After trailing the 76ers for most of that evening’s game, the Hawks took the lead in the third quarter to defeat their opponent, bringing them one step closer to playoffs. The crowd erupted in cheers before dispersing into the streets of downtown Atlanta. “When I first got here [in 2000], we weren’t very good,” Blase recalled of his early years with the Hawks. “But to me, working with good people is better than working with winning people.”

Sometimes, you’re lucky enough to have both.