

NAIA Athletic Trainers Redeployed to Assist on Front Lines of COVID-19 Fight

KANSAS CITY, Mo. – On college campuses across the country, athletic trainers are at the forefront of both preventing and treating injuries for their teams. This group of medical personnel prevents, examine, diagnose, treat, and rehab injuries, but with the outbreak of COVID-19, they have had to adjust how they carry out their role. While athletic trainers are still working with their student-athletes remotely, some have also been redeployed to the front lines.

Athletic trainers kicked-off March with National Athletic Trainers Month. The National Association of Athletic Trainers (NATA) launched a Health Care in Action campaign to help demonstrate the important work that athletic trainers do and how they are an extension of health care.

Shortly after, the sports world came to an unexpected halt as events were canceled and people were encouraged to stay home to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Like many working or competing in athletics, athletic trainers were also left asking 'what do you do when you work in athletics and there are no athletics'.

In some cases, like at IU South Bend (Ind.) and LSU Shreveport (La.), the athletic trainers are contracted from an outside company or local hospital system. Since they were not physically working on campus they were called to the front lines to work in local hospitals and clinics as per their contracting company.

"Despite sports and our normal course of action coming to a halt, I saw this as an opportunity for athletic trainers to influence community healthcare during a global pandemic," said Lance Champagne, head athletic trainer at LSU Shreveport (La.). "I was glad to help and felt grateful for the opportunity to assist our hospital system in our efforts to serve our community."

Champagne was stationed at the entrance of a hospital where he screened individuals to determine what brought them to the hospital, performed temperature screenings, turned unessential visitors away, directed visitors to the emergency department, escorted patients and whatever else he was asked to assist with.

Some of the areas that athletic trainers are able to help fill the gap, as noted by NATA, are: triage, patient intake and documentation, clinical diagnosis, evaluations, administer invasive and non-invasive diagnostic tests and patient education. They are also able to help in telemedicine for patients at home much like many are doing with their student-athletes.

"There's a massive sense of pride to be able to help our community and work within our health system," Kara Werner-Sanders, the head athletic trainer at IU South Bend (Ind.). "We are lucky to be able to represent the athletic training profession in our community and within our health system. More people at the hospital know who we are and what we do than they ever did

before. What's sad and sometimes frustrating is that we can't see our student-athletes in a typical fashion to do prehab, rehab, evaluations and such. So it makes you feel like you aren't able to do everything you can for your athletes in the normal way that you are used to, but your doing so much more for your community where your athletes are going to school that it helps with that frustration."

While COVID-19 has changed the way that athletic trainers interact with their student-athletes, they have found ways to work around not physically being in the same space when working with them. Kansas Wesleyan Athletic Director, Steve Wilson, noted that "while their work has shifted, their care has not."

"This [working remotely] has definitely been challenging and often frustrating from the standpoint of rehab," said Champagne. "There are a lot of jobs out there that are able to do work from home, and while we have addressed some administrative tasks that we are able to handle remotely, the majority of our job is predicated on that in-person interaction with our student-athletes that we just are not able to have right now."

Student-athletes are noticing the dedication that their athletic trainers have while they are forced to communicate with them differently instead of being able to walk into the athletic training room as needed.

"I have had to significantly change the way I communicate with my athletic trainer and the way I do rehab and pre-hab," said Charles Pollnow, student-athlete at Benedictine Mesa (Ariz.). "My athletic trainer has helped move mountains to make sure I have the proper training and workouts to fix my injuries. The fact that she has been able to give me the right workouts just by what I describe I'm feeling and not being able to do any tests on me is amazing. I have never been more appreciative of my athletic trainers. After seeing how much detail and time she has put into the workouts, I have seen a new light of what our athletic trainers do for us. I am extremely happy and thankful that my athletic trainer has put in the time she has to work with me despite everything that is going on."

Werner-Sanders said that she was able to work with one of her student-athletes, Alexis Issette, who was injured while doing a home workout. Werner-Sanders was able to keep her calm, work with her to diagnose what the issue was and what to do to get her back to playing form.

"I feel really grateful for Kara, but I wasn't really surprised by how immediate her help was because that's just how our athletic trainers are," said Issette. "They always go above and beyond and get their job done no matter what the circumstances are. That was a big reason why I chose my school because of how thorough our athletic trainers have always been."

While athletic trainers are focused first and foremost on their student-athletes they are also working hard to prepare for the next school year and how they will need to adjust because of COVID-19.

"A lot of athletic training is hands-on when working with our patients to prevent/improve their injury or condition but there is also a lot of administrative work that is involved with our profession," said Meredith Dill, Missouri Baptist head athletic trainer.

Many departments are also using this time to update policies, procedures, protocols and insurance paperwork as well as other special projects and professional development to continue to make the department better in preparation for fall sports.

Athletic trainers have become sort of a "success coach" during these times. "Someone to be a resource for the student-athlete either physically, emotionally, spiritually or mentally," said Darin Voigt, head athletic trainer of Vanguard (Calif.).