

ATHLETIC TRAINERS IN CONNECTICUT SCHOOLS A MUST!

By Fred Balsamo, CMAA, Executive Director, Connecticut Association of Athletic Directors

High School and middle schools sports programs in Connecticut provide a tremendous opportunity for young people to grow both physical and mentally. Participation in the right program with a coach that sees the student-athlete as a developing young person is fundamental to the growth and maturity of our young people. However, even with the right coaching and the best equipment, there is always a concern about the safety of sports. To keep injuries to a minimal level, the coach must teach the proper techniques and the school should provide quality equipment, and it should be properly fitted. Unfortunately, injuries may still occur. One way to further minimize the risk of injury and provide the proper intervention when an injury occurs is to utilize an athletic trainer (AT). These professionals are well-trained and can deal with the prevention and treatment of sports related injuries. Having an AT on staff can also help to adequately prepare athletes for practices and competitions, and he/she can evaluate an athlete's readiness to return to participation after an injury. Having an AT present during practices and contests provides early opportunities to recognize injuries, especially concussions, and insures a speedy pursuit of the proper treatment and care of those injuries. Athletic trainers can provide a consistent implementation of an emergency action plan when needed and as first responders they can provide immediate emergency care to an injured athlete. An AT can be invaluable to a school district in preventing exposure to liability by developing and instituting a standardized policy and procedure protocol for all sports injuries, by overseeing the athletics insurance claims, by providing prevention and treatment education to athletes and coaches, and by helping to develop and monitor dynamic strength and conditioning programs that are free of contraindicated exercises.

Why do we need an Athletic Trainer now? It has become increasingly evident that there is a growing concern about the safety of our interscholastic sports. Recent concussion and sudden cardiac arrest legislation have placed further mandates on schools and coaches in our state, which already has the most stringent coaching education requirements in the country. Additionally, the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference, the states governing body for school sports, has placed further mandates on schools dealing with heat acclimatization, contact times in football practices and the reporting of all football related injuries to the state office. These mandates were not initiated by catastrophic events, but rather because of the vision and foresight needed to prevent such occurrences. These are all necessary steps to insure the safety of our athletes, but who is left to actually insure all measures and safeguards are implemented and monitored properly. Without the help of an individual on staff who is well-trained in medical concepts, these responsibilities will fall upon the shoulders of individuals that have minimal training. This will eventually lead to a shortage of coaches and athletic administrators who already have a full plate.

How can the Athletic Trainer help implement concussion legislation? The Connecticut concussion legislation of 2010 and 2014 make it almost imperative to have an AT on staff in order to properly diagnose injuries, remove an athlete from participation and then return the athlete to practice once the proper protocols are satisfied. The way our laws are written a child must be removed from participation if he/she shows signs or symptoms of a concussion after a suspected blow to the head or body. The AT, not the coach, is the best person to make that decision on the sideline. We tell coaches to err on the side of caution and seek medical expertise, the AT provides that immediate expertise. The role of the AT becomes even more prominent with the return of the athlete from an injury. The law states that a child may not return unless he/she receives proper medical clearance. This may be the child's pediatrician, an ER doctor or other approved care provider; however, that clearance does not allow the athlete to return to full participation. The clearance allows the athlete to start a "return to play protocol" which is a graduated sequence of activities closely monitored to insure there are no reoccurrences of any signs or symptoms of the injury. Once the steps of the protocol have been followed, then the child needs a second and final clearance in order to return to full participation. The Connecticut state law allows an AT to make that final determination and eliminates the need for the parents to make repeated trips to a doctor's office. Lastly the AT is a tremendous safeguard for schools if they are employed by the district because he/she can override an overzealous parent who may be able to secure a note from an unsuspecting physician by masking the issue in order to get their child back into action sooner than advisable.

Can having an Athletic Trainer lower the injury rate? Studies have shown that schools that employ an AT have fewer injuries and that the diagnosis of concussions is more accurate and immediate. Also, according to research done in comparing the Reporting Information Online (RIO) to local Sports Injury Surveillance System (SISS) data on sample high school programs without athletic trainers for the same sports and time period showed overall injury rates 1.73 times higher among soccer players and 1.22 times higher among basketball players in schools without athletic trainers. In contrast, concussion injury rates were 8.05 times higher in soccer and 4.5 times higher in basketball in schools with athletic trainers. While less than 50 percent of United States high schools employ athletic trainers, "this data shows the valuable role that they can play in preventing, diagnosing and managing concussions and other injuries," said Cynthia LaBell, MD, FAAP. She went on to say, "Athletic trainers have a skill set that is very valuable, especially now when there is such a focus on concussions and related treatment and care. Concussed athletes are more likely to be identified in schools with athletic trainers and thus more likely to receive proper treatment." "Athletic trainers facilitate treatment of injuries and monitor recovery so that athletes are not returned to play prematurely," said Dr. LaBella. See more at: <http://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/Pages/High-Schools-with-Athletic-Trainers-have-More-Diagnosed-Concussions-Fewer-Overall-Injuries.aspx#sthash.WuO3x5fc.Hw6rjfjJ.dpuf>

How do we justify the cost of employing an Athletic Trainer? Let's start by asking the question, "What is a child's health and safety worth?" Besides all the reasons mentioned above, all ATs

are certified to perform AED and CPR. In Connecticut, coaches are required to have CPR and First Aid, but there is no requirement for coaches to have the expertise needed to utilize an AED machine. Coaches get a refresher course every few years, but seldom put their course work into practice. If a child is lying unconscious on the ground, we can all agree that the child would be better off having someone attend him/her who has continual medical training and the expertise needed to properly attend that child. A coach in that situation may be dealing with that type of medical issue for the first time. Furthermore, an athletic trainer's expertise allows for an immediate medical evaluation that can direct an injured child to the proper medical provider, thus expediting the treatment and recovery of the student-athlete. Athletic trainers should be considered an asset that far outweighs their cost.

In summary, having an athletic trainer on staff in our Connecticut schools is the prudent and responsible thing to do. A school district will be better prepared to deal with the prevention and treatment of the day to day medical issues that may occur. The use of ATs will raise the level of safety for students, coaches, parents and the school's administration. An AT can provide an environment free of hazards and risks, which will reduce the exposure to litigation and will lower the anxiety levels in parents about potential injuries to their children. Having an athletic trainer on staff provides a frontline plan of action for any and all medical issues. The safety and wellbeing of our children should be our number one priority and we should all be proponents of having an athletic trainer on staff for all school athletics programs.