

Playing It Safe

By Tim Zatzariny Jr. '94

Tim Zatzariny Jr. '94 is the assistant editor of At The Shore, the weekend guide of The Press of Atlantic City.



Camden High School trainer Rosa Marquez '95 works with athletes during practices and games to prevent injuries and assess and rehabilitate when they occur.

John Ross '91 knew something was seriously wrong as soon as he saw the symptoms. Ross, a graduate of Rowan's athletic training program, was attending an Atlantic City High School freshman football game in 1994 as part of his job as the school's athletic trainer. One of the running backs received a hard blow to the stomach during a tackle and came to the bench complaining of shoulder pain. After examining him, Ross noticed rigidity in the player's abdomen, and determined he might have a lacerated spleen, a potentially fatal injury. Ross acted quickly. The player was rushed to a hospital, where Ross' evaluation was confirmed and the player's spleen was removed.

The player later made a full recovery. Without Ross, he may never have made it to the hospital. Ross is one of a growing number of athletic trainers who are employed by high schools and are responsible for the health of young athletes. "In many cases now, an athletic trainer is the

first person who sees an athlete after he or she has been injured," says Chuck Whedon, Rowan College's athletic trainer and coordinator of Rowan's athletic training education program. "They're the life support."

It wasn't always so. "Historically, a trainer was responsible for teaching an athlete skills," says Whedon, who is also president of the Athletic Trainers' Society of New Jersey. "But as the medical field progressed, strength and flexibility became a much larger part of the picture."

Students in the Health and Exercise Science Department's specialization in athletic training take classes in emergency care to prepare them to make medical evaluations like Ross did. They also get hands-on experience with Rowan's athletic teams, where they learn how to assess and treat common sports injuries like sprained ankles and muscle pulls. "By the time they're ready to graduate, they can take care of our athletes," Whedon says proudly.

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Off the field, John Ross '91 uses equipment to assess and treat athletes at Atlantic City High School. Here, he employs electric stimulation for a muscle injury.

After graduation, all athletic training students must pass an exam given by the National Athletic Trainers' Association before they can be certified. Though about 35 states in the U.S. currently require athletic trainers to be licensed by the state they're working in, New Jersey only requires that athletic trainers register with the state Board of Medical Examiners, which oversees athletic training.

This has created some controversy among athletic trainers in New Jersey. "In a physical therapy office, I'm very limited in what I can do," says Dominic Acchitelli '94, who splits his time between working at Prism Physical Therapy in Sewell and coordinating the athletic training program at Glassboro High School. "Under state law, a therapist has to be present whenever I work with a patient in the office. But in high school and college settings, I can do most things myself."

Acchitelli is a perfect example of the increased role athletic trainers are taking in high school sports. About a decade

ago, high schools across the nation began to realize that their sports teams needed more than just a good coach—they needed someone who could prevent student athletes from getting injured and someone who could quickly rehabilitate those who did get hurt. "Getting athletic trainers into high schools has been one of the biggest changes in the field," Acchitelli says.

Acchitelli was hired by Glassboro High School last year to create an athletic training program at the school. After a successful first year working with the school's athletic teams

and establishing a solid program, the enthusiastic Acchitelli hopes to create a student trainer program at the high school this year, which just might inspire some students to follow in his footsteps.

But despite all of his accomplishments in the past year, Acchitelli says there are still some people who aren't quite sure exactly what it is he does for a living. "They think an athletic trainer is a physical therapist or someone who writes up a program for you at the gym," he says.

Ross says semantics has a lot to do with why the field of athletic training is a misunderstood one. "I'd like to see a name change to a term that includes the word 'therapist' in some way," he says.

Ross, a former inside linebacker for the Profs, became interested in athletic training after a torn knee ligament suffered during the last game of the 1985 season kept him off the field for two years. As part of his rehabilitation program, Ross began spending a lot of time in the training room in the Esby gymnasium. A physical education major at the

time, Ross returned to the Profs in 1988 and suffered a neck injury that ended his football career. After a few semesters off from school to regroup, Ross returned to Rowan and began taking athletic training courses.

Since 1994, Ross has been the athletic trainer and strength and conditioning coordinator at Atlantic City High School. There, he stresses that staying in shape year-round, not just during the season, is one of most important ways to keep athletes from getting hurt during sports. "Athletic trainers are responsible for the prevention of athletic injuries and strength and conditioning is a prerequisite to the prevention of injuries," he says.

Like Ross, Rosa Marquez '90 doesn't really like to be called an athletic trainer. She prefers to be known as a "sports therapist." And like Ross, an injury inadvertently led Marquez into athletic training. Spending time in the training room in Esby after a neck injury sparked Marquez' interest in the field, and eventually she entered the athletic training program at Rowan full-time.

Following a stint as athletic director at Gloucester County College, Marquez took over her current position as athletic trainer at Camden High School in 1993. Marquez spends her summers at a sports camp for children, but during the school year, she tries to find ways to decrease injuries among the athletes at Camden High.

At the end of each sports season, Marquez tallies the two most common injuries in each sport (hamstring and quadriceps pulls lead her list overall) and develops an exercise program designed to cut down on those injuries. She then gives written recommendations to the coaches of each sport. Marquez' strategy seems to be working, as she's seen fewer total injuries each year since she's started.

The health of high school athletes often now depends on the athletic trainer on the sidelines. "I want that kid out on the field," Marquez says. "If I won't let a kid play, the coach knows it's for a good reason." ■