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### Trainer's skill helped save athlete's life

Athletic trainers can mean the difference between ability and disability, life and death for student athletes

VERNON — Lest anyone be tempted to discount the importance of athletic trainers in a high school, believing that all they do is tape and ice, look at the recent case of a varsity football player at Vernon Township High School who received a blow to his abdomen during a practice.



Joanne Ploch tapes up an ankle before practice. The athletic trainer saved an athlete's life earlier this month by picking up on the subtle symptoms of a spleen injury. photo provided

Thanks to the astuteness and training of Joanne Ploch the student, a running back, survived. An athletic trainer for 19 years (six in Vernon), she recognized his symptoms — pain under the ribs, nausea and pain and numbness worsening in his left arm, a condition she called a Kehr sign — as an indication of a spleen injury. Doctors confirmed later that the young athlete had indeed lacerated his spleen. He will be out of play for the rest of the season, but has returned to school and will rely on the Vernon athletic trainers, Ploch and Scott Berge, to help with his rehab when he is ready.

To some people, having an athletic trainer, or two as Vernon Township High School has, may seem a luxury. But for the 800 students a year who participate in sports at Vernon, the two trainers could mean the difference between contributing to their team, be it football, tennis, lacrosse, soccer, baseball, basketball, field hockey — the list is quite long — or sitting at home eating potato chips and watching Oprah after school.

Not all high schools in New Jersey have athletic trainers, Ploch says. Approximately 83 percent of the high schools either have one on staff or at least have one available; Vernon is one of very few that employs two trainers.

What they do

They are responsible for far more than "taping," which is important to keep the athletes' ligaments and joints protected. Athletic trainers, who function under the auspices of the New Jersey Board of Medical Examiners, are considered to be medical professionals and have to pass a national certification exam. Vernon Township High School is distinguished as one of the few high schools in the state that is approved as a host site for clinical rotation training required of all student athletic trainers. The training is akin to that of a physical therapist, and in fact, according to Berge, an athletic trainer for 21 years, much of their work is rehabilitation for injured athletes.

He said it helps that their "population" of students is physically fit to begin with, which gives them a great advantage in rehabilitation. But a large part of their job is to take care of the athletes while they are in practice or in competition, and sometimes, with the addition of fields to the campus

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several years ago, there could be five games going on at once. The athletic trainers work long days when there are home games or meets, and travel only with the varsity football for away games, which Ploch said is normal for a high school.

But no matter what service they are providing for the coaches and athletes, both Ploch and Berge agree that the most important ingredient is trust. "The athletes have to trust us even more than they trust the coach," Berge said, a fact which was well-illustrated this month when that football player with a lacerated spleen did not have to suffer any serious consequences of an injury that can easily be fatal because his athletic trainer was familiar with the subtle symptoms of a more serious condition and wasted no time getting him help.

That underscores the most satisfying part of their job, says Berge, which is to see a kid who has been injured back on the field.

— Kathleen Weyant



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