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Young athletes at risk

Monday, September 21, 2009

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BY JEFF ROBERTS
 THE RECORD
 STAFF WRITER

4 Comments

An athlete goes down and does not get back up.



CARMINE GALASSO / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
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Passaic High School athletic trainer Michael Prybicien stretching Jorge Viscio, a Rutgers-bound lineman, during a scrimmage.

FAST FACTS

- At least 11 North Jersey school districts and private high schools do not employ full-time athletic trainers, citing the cost of the position:

- Becton Regional
- Bogota
- Eastern Christian
- Englewood
- Immaculate Conception
- North Arlington
- Palisades Park
- Paterson Catholic
- Queen of Peace
- Saddle River Day
- Weehawken

- Since 2000, 105 high school football players nationwide have died from injuries on the field.

A football player wobbles back to the huddle after a jarring hit. A gymnast just misses landing her dismount.

Moments like these underscore the necessity of having athletic trainers on hand at high school games.

But at least 11 school districts and private schools in Bergen, Passaic and Hudson counties do not employ athletic trainers, leaving dozens of high school practices and games each day without a professional to treat and help prevent injuries.

"I can't imagine not having one there when a kid gets hurt," said David Saper, Elmwood Park's athletic director. "It's not really an option."

More than 80 percent of New Jersey high schools have athletic trainers; some large schools such as Passaic Tech and Clifton so value them that they employ two to meet the needs of hundreds of athletes playing varsity, JV and freshman sports.

"It was a necessity," said Clifton athletic director Rich LaDuke, whose school offers 30 varsity teams. "We cannot not have a trainer. We cannot have a trainer for football and not have one for the other eight sports going on."

The New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association encourages school districts to employ athletic trainers, but does not require it. The state also does not require trainers.

But that could soon change. State Sen. Paul A. Sarlo, D-Wood-Ridge, said Friday that he will introduce a bill requiring all high schools with athletic programs to provide a trainer.

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- Twenty football players died in 2008 alone, including Max Gilpin, a 15-year-old from Kentucky felled by heatstroke.

"I believe at the high school level now because of the competitiveness, every school should have a certified athletic trainer," he said.

The schools that lack trainers are all small or parochial, and officials say they cannot afford trainers.

Bogota nearly lost its athletics program in recent years due to budget crunches. Paterson Catholic has fought just to remain open.

And tax-weary voters in North Arlington rejected the district's 2008-09 budget referendum, which included the creation of an athletic-trainer position, according to Damon Placenti, North Arlington's athletic director.

"Everybody in the district and everybody in the community wants one," Placenti said. "We all know there's a need. It just puts a lot more pressure on our coaching staff. Believe me, I want one. It just hasn't happened yet."

The average salary for a full-time athletic trainer in New Jersey is \$61,375, according to a 2008 survey conducted by the Athletic Trainers' Society of New Jersey.

Most of the schools without an athletic trainer attempt to fill the void.

To cover practices and games, Paterson Catholic employs an EMT who also works Giants and Nets games for the New Jersey Sports and Exhibition Authority.

"For us, we're a small school and you know what our financial situation is," said Jim Slezak, Paterson Catholic's athletic director. "If we went and got an athletic trainer, he'd be making more than me."

Bogota has a chiropractor tape up athletes and hires an athletic trainer to monitor games. But practices go unsupervised.

"In an ideal world, we'd have a trainer. Absolutely. Not even a question about it," said Brad DiRupo, Bogota's athletic director. "But we deal with what we have to deal with."

Coaches at high schools without trainers are often forced to act as caregivers, most armed with limited training, even while they're distracted by their main duties: preparing their athletes for the next game.

Those districts are asking too much of coaches, contends Michael Prybicen, president of the Athletic Trainers' Society of New Jersey.

"You can't expect a coach who's taken a first-aid or CPR course to be held to the same standards [as an athletic trainer]," said Prybicen, Passaic's athletic trainer. "There's a major difference."

Athletic trainers have to earn a bachelor's or master's degree in athletic training, which entails a heavy medical focus. (Seventy percent have an advanced degree.) They also must be certified.

North Arlington football coach Anthony Marck and his assistants have taken first-aid and CPR courses and keep a defibrillator at their field. When a player is hurt, a coach leaves his post to attend to him. On game days, an assistant coach tapes up each player.

But Marck knows it's not the same as having an athletic trainer.

"It's been a very, very difficult situation," he said. "They're paying us to be coaches. That's what we do. ... It scares me very much."

One North Arlington parent acknowledges the situation is not ideal, but has faith in the coaching staff.

"Who wouldn't?" said Austin Burke, father of junior lineman Austin Burke Jr., when asked if he would like the school to supply an athletic trainer. "But I'm confident with the fact that these kids are well taken care of. If it's not in the budget, it is what it is."

Clifton's LaDuke is sympathetic to districts that lack trainers, and blames the state for providing inadequate education funding. But he and others wonder if priorities are askew when finances take precedence over safety.

"It's all about money, but where does it stop when we're talking about the safety of kids?" LaDuke said.

Athletic trainers do more than treat ankle sprains, according to Prybicen. They are the first responders in potentially catastrophic situations, stabilizing athletes after head, neck and spine injuries. Prybicen said he has spine-boarded about a dozen athletes in his career.

Many log six- and seven-day weeks, their shifts stretching from early afternoon to late at night as they work to prevent injuries and guide rehabilitation, keeping players on the field.

"At our level, I think [having an athletic trainer] has a huge impact on a kid's future, on how they think about injuries, and has a huge impact on their lives," said Nick Nicholaides, the athletic trainer at Ridgewood. "If they go through a big injury ... and you have access to an athletic trainer, they help you get back, and it's a huge thing."

It was a huge thing for Najee Salaam. The Passaic wide receiver and Division I prospect credits Prybicen with helping him get back on the field last season after a compound fracture and dislocation of the right thumb.

"I wasn't supposed to come back last season, but with his help I was able to," Salaam said. "I don't worry about getting hurt with him here."

Athletic trainers also forge bonds with athletes that are crucial when gauging the subtle symptoms of concussions and heatstroke, according to Prybicen. And trainers provide peace of mind for coaches and



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school districts by devising emergency action plans to eliminate the mishandling of the injured and by preventing lawsuits — or worse.

In Louisville, Ky., a high school football coach, Jason Stinson, was acquitted last week of reckless homicide and first-degree wanton endangerment charges. It was the first time a high school coach had been criminally charged in a heat-related death of a student athlete.

No athletic trainer was on hand to recognize the symptoms of heatstroke or to identify that 15-year old Max Gilpin was in distress.

Stinson's legal troubles are far from over. He and his assistant coaches at Pleasure Ridge Park High School, as well as the principal and athletic director, have been named in a wrongful death suit filed by members of Gilpin's family. They and prosecutors claim that the coaches should have recognized that Gilpin needed help.

Maybe an athletic trainer would have.

"If they're going to have sports, if they don't have a full-time athletic trainer, they're putting themselves at a tremendous disadvantage," said Nicholaides.

Staff Writer Stephen Hennessey contributed to this article. E-mail: robertsj@northjersey.com

Day in the life

An athletic trainer's day begins long before kickoff and ends well after players head home.

The hours: Their days begin not on the field during a game but in the trainer's room beforehand, leading athletes through rehabilitation for injuries ranging from ankle sprains to concussions. Their days don't end until they staff practices and games and treat players who suffered injuries during the day. On Saturdays, their shifts often begin around sunrise, treating athletes and taping up football players before games. About 65 percent of athletic trainers work more than 40 hours a week. Fourteen percent work more than 50 hours a week, according to a recent survey conducted by the Athletic Trainers' Society of New Jersey.

The work: There's more to being a trainer than taping up ankles. They often patrol multiple fields, using golf carts and communications systems to keep tabs on dozens of athletes scattered throughout town. Having an asthma attack? A trainer's there with the athlete's spare inhaler. Allergy to a bee sting? A trainer responds with an EpiPen. An athlete goes down and isn't moving? A trainer responds to stabilize the player and prepare him or her for a trip to the hospital. Trainers supervise physicals forms to ensure athletes are cleared to play and monitor preexisting conditions. They also devise emergency action plans to eliminate panic when serious injuries occur.

The cost: Athletic trainers in New Jersey earn \$61,375 on average, not including compensation for supplemental hours, according to the survey. The national average is \$40,422.



What are these?

Reader Comments

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1. **Britterz7** says: I am extremely surprised that they are not already mandatory. I ran cross country and track all through high school, and now do so in college, and I cannot imagine not having a trainer. I have been fortunate enough to rarely need their help, but I did pass out once and was helped by the trainer. Coach's cannot be everywhere at once, and they're not properly trained. In an area where three kids died last year football, we should all value what a trainer could help prevent. I am not saying that those particular deaths could have been prevented, but I'm sure others have. They can recognize concussions and many other problems. I would never want to play a contact sport without a trainer present as so many injuries require a quick response time.
2. **razor** says: R U kidding me, Klecko? Kids playing with broken bones are "not like kids today." Gimme a break. Lose a child to a concussion that leads to a brain clot and then talk to me. If you have competitive HS sports, you better have an athletic trainer or my son/daughter will not be playing sports there.
3. **KleckoGastineau** says: My HS coaches taped the FB teams injuries. It wasn't until a couple years later when some kid broke his wrist or thumb that the school had to get a athletic trainer, because the asst. coach kept taping him and let him play. I believe he sued because has permanent damage. Also, I think some soccer boy got a couple concussions and kept playing after he got knocked out too that made them get a trainer. Back then we played hurt, not like kids today.

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