



As Gloucester County districts look for places to cut, athletic trainers are in unwelcome spotlight

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The hours before the bell rings are Tanya Dargusch's quiet time.

Deep in the halls of the sprawling Washington Township High School, the athletic training room and office is desolate before 2:10 p.m. Dargusch uses this time to call parents and doctors, fill out insurance paperwork, and prep the training room for the onslaught of students.

Moments after school lets out, students flood the room, laughing, chatting about their day and talking about their latest sports rivalries.

In her two decades working as the sole full-time athletic trainer for the county's largest high school, Dargusch has established quite a routine. Even the students know exactly what to do.

Hopping up onto the taping tables, students immediately start hiking up their pant legs, or pulling off their shoes as they wait for Dargusch to wrap up their injuries before they head out onto the field.

Across the room, other athletes jump right into their physical therapy routines — whether it's riding the exercise bike, jogging on a trampoline or stretching their legs using resistance bands.

Rehab and prevention are a large part of Dargusch's role, overseeing the health of some 1,200 athletes every year. But the bulk of her work is dealing with emergencies out on the field and evaluating injuries.

"They just really keep us hopping because it's such a big school," Dargusch said.

- Between budget cuts throughout New Jersey schools and the growing awareness of sports-related injuries on the high school fields, the role of the athletic trainer is not only changing, but becoming more crucial.

This year, Washington Township was one of many districts in South Jersey that decided to cut back on its sports programs, and with it, the part-time athletic trainer position. But after a public outcry from parents, the board opted to institute an athletic participation fee before the fall season started — a move that helped generate new revenue and save the freshman sports program from being chopped.

What the district didn't consider at the time was the impact of reinstating those sports and still eliminating Dargusch's part-time help.

"For the last number of years now, I've asked for my part-time position to be full-time and the reason is because of the volume of students we have, because we're so large," Dargusch said. "Obviously, I understand if times are tough, you've got to make cuts, but my feeling is, you cut out the number of sub-varsity things and not cut where you need medical care. ... I think people don't realize what happens, and what we do."

From when the bell rings to when the whistle blows at game time, Dargusch and her two Rowan University athletic-trainer interns are swamped.

Students who might have been hurt on the field the day before come in to have Dargusch evaluate their injuries. Depending on the season and the sport being played, it might be a sprained ankle, torn ACL, or dislocated shoulder. Athletes are often sent to their own physician, but will come back to the high school trainer to receive continued therapy.

"We really are proactive about getting them to do treatment so they can get back into the game faster and at a high level of participation," Dargusch said. "We want them back soon, but also stronger and as good as they were before, if not better, so we can prevent that injury from happening again."

Since she's been doing this for years, Dargusch can easily multi-task. Without even looking, Dargusch tapes up one athlete's arm while instructing a football player on how to treat a knee injury.

"We see a lot of the same injuries over the years," she said. "As people become more educated, and all the things coming out about concussions, I tend now to see more kids reporting their symptoms."

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When a traumatic injury happens on the field ð on any field across the country ð word travels fast.

"We're in an information age," Dargusch said. "It's not like 20 years ago. You hear all those things on a national level."

One injury that caught nationwide attention recently was Rutgers University defensive tackle Eric LeBrand, who became paralyzed below the neck after he tried to make a tackle in the fourth quarter of a game against Army.

The high-contact collision game of football is one of the most important places for an athletic trainer to be stationed after school.

Come 4 p.m., that's most likely where you'll find Dargusch or part-time athletic trainer Sean Eakin. High school students serving as athletic training assistants scatter themselves among the many different practices and stay vigilant, ready to call the trainers to alert them of any injuries.

"Sometimes I can have four injuries at the same time," Dargusch said.

And that's where triage kicks in.

"Somebody might have a head injury on the other field," she said. "Someone might have bleeding on other field. I take the more serious injury and have the other person sit and wait on ice until I can get there."

"It doesn't happen like every single day," she added. "It's just a little hairy when it does happen."

Eakin comes in to assist during the high-volume hours of 2 to 5 p.m. and on Saturdays.

"It'd be great to have him full-time," she said. "That's when you can do things like impact-testing."

Dargusch is referring to a new test that's now being implemented in some 20 states across the country, according to the National Athletic Trainers' Association, NATA. Just this year, legislators in New Jersey passed resolutions in both the Assembly and Senate urging schools to implement baseline testing.

Dargusch said she's currently putting together estimates of how much the program would cost.

The test would be administered pre-season to measure an athlete's cognitive function such as attention span and working memory. They'd administer the test again after an athlete is injured to determine his or her condition. The test could be a valuable tool, said Brian Robinson, a high school athletic trainer in Illinois

and the chair of the NATA.

In high school sports alone, more than 400,000 concussions occurred nationwide in the 2008-09 school year, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

Jennifer Smith, who's in her first year as the part-time athletic trainer at Pitman High School, said when she graduated from Rowan in the spring, concussions were a big part of the curriculum, but they always have been.

"We were always trained to notice these things," Smith said.

At the start of the year, Smith showed the athletes a video about a student at LaSalle University who had a concussion but hid his symptoms from the staff and ended up having second-impact syndrome where the brain swells again before having a chance to recuperate from the first blow.

"We show this video to the kids because it's supposed to give them the idea that you don't want to hide your symptoms from the athletic training staff and we want to know what's going on so further injury doesn't occur," Smith said.

Having a cognitive test could help, said Robinson, of the NATA.

"Baseline testing is an essential tool for diagnosis and recovery," Robinson said. The problem, however, could be paying for it, especially when schools may be struggling to even maintain the sports and athletic trainers they have.

However, a greater public awareness about the seriousness of injuries on the field may be helping the cause, he said.

"I think the public in general is becoming more aware of the advantages of having an athletic trainer in secondary schools," he said. "Every year, principals and superintendents must make hard decisions to how are they going to allocate funds. I think in today's society, you can't afford not to have one."

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