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## Careers

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**"I can't believe I get paid to do this"****What it's like to be an athletic trainer in the NFL**

By Kaitlin Madden, CareerBuilder.com



Walk into virtually any [elementary school](#) classroom and pose the general question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and chances are you'll be greeted with shouts of "President of the United States!" "Miss America!" and "I want to be in the NFL!"

For most of us, though, reality usually sets in around the same time as puberty, and we realize that our odds of becoming the next Peyton Manning are about as slim as our odds of bypassing the awkward pre-teen phase we've found ourselves in.

While some of us abandon our hopes of a dream job altogether, in favor of more practical goals like becoming a

[businessperson](#) or [engineer](#), others are lucky enough to stumble upon a career path that's both realistic and dream-worthy.

Take Leigh Weiss, for example. The [New Jersey](#) native decided early on that he wanted to pursue a career in [sports](#), but by his teenage years, he knew his athletic talent would only take him so far. So, Weiss instead decided to follow a career path that would be practical, but would still allow him to be involved in sports. In high school, Weiss became interested in [athletic training](#), a career choice that was solidified at the end of his senior year of high school.

The weekend after his senior prom, Weiss dove into shallow water and broke his neck, losing all feeling and strength in his body from the neck down. Fortunately, though, after months of [physical therapy](#) and [rehabilitation](#), Weiss was able to regain his muscle strength and eventually walk again. His grueling but miraculous first-hand experience with physical therapy only reinforced his desire to go into the [health care](#) field, and he went on to college to pursue a degree in athletic training.

In the nearly 10 years since his accident, Weiss has earned a B.S. in athletic training, an M.S. in kinesiology and recently completed a Doctorate in Physical Therapy. He's also landed his dream job. Weiss is currently in his fourth season as a full-time athletic trainer for the [New York Giants](#), and he's already got a Super Bowl win under his belt -- from the team's 2008 championship win against the [New England Patriots](#). Here, Weiss talks about what it's like to live his dream.

**Many people who go into athletic training dream of working with a professional sports team. Is working with the New York Giants a dream come true for you?**

I think it is a dream come true. I knew as I was finishing my undergraduate and graduate studies that I wanted to work in the National Football League. To be able to do it a year after graduation is truly a gift. In addition, to do so in New York, for one of the most storied and respected sports organizations in the country, and only 30 minutes from where I grew up is truly a blessing.

**What are the moments when you think to yourself "I can't believe I actually get paid to do this?"**

I think that moment for me is every Sunday before kick-off. And it is not just the privilege of working on the sidelines during an NFL football game in front of millions of people, but its knowing that your hard work and long hours of working with the players week-in and week-out contributes to them doing what they love to do and the success at which they do it. My biggest reward or "wow" moment is watching a player who may have been hurt the previous season or previous weeks, and after countless months, weeks, or hours of treatment and rehabilitation get to return to what they love to do and help the team be successful.

**The most visible role of an athletic trainer in the NFL is during a game, when a player gets injured. But what is your day-to-day routine like?**

Everyone sees the athletic trainer run onto the field following an injury, but very few get to see what we do the other six days a week. We are responsible for the complete healthcare of these players whether it is an orthopedic or general medical issue, and that is something we take great pride in. The ultimate goal during the week is to return the player to football safely and as quickly as possible.

Once a player gets injured, we work very closely with our team physicians to evaluate that injury and arrive at a prompt and accurate diagnosis. We then decide the appropriate actions following the injury, whether it is further evaluation by a specialist, diagnostic imaging, surgery or implementing treatment and rehabilitation programs.

**What is something most people don't know about your job?**

The question that I am most often asked is, "Now that the season is over, does that mean you have the rest of the year off?"

In the NFL there really is no off-season anymore. As soon as the season ends, as an athletic training staff, we are working with our physicians to schedule any surgeries that our players may require or were put off during the season. We also are responsible for the rehabilitation after these operations, whether the player will be rehabbing with us or whether we need to find them facility near their hometown.

While that is going on we are usually also preparing for the NFL combine and draft, which for us requires the gathering and reporting of medical information on all of the college prospects to

our scouting department and management.

By April the players return from their breaks and begin the off-season strength and conditioning program. We have our annual player physical examinations, mini-camps and football practice beginning again May and June and before you know it, it is back to Albany for training camp at the end of July and into August. Despite the season only being four to five months out of the year, there is very little down time for athletic trainers in the NFL.

#### **How did you work your way to the NFL?**

My story about breaking into the NFL is probably similar to most other athletic trainers in this setting. We all start by working as summer interns during pre-season training camp, [which] usually involves long, hot days and very little sleep. I ended up working three summers as an undergraduate student with the Giants from 2002-2004.

Upon finishing up my graduate studies in 2006, I was hired as a season-long intern, where your role is an extension of the athletic training staff. This experience was really a true taste of the day-to-day operations of an athletic trainer in the NFL. The following year, Ronnie [Barnes, vice president of medical services] was looking to add someone to his staff and decided to bring me on board. So it is really a three-step process: summer internship, seasonal internship, and being in the right place at the right time.

#### **What was your first season in the NFL like? Were there a lot of nerves?**

My first [full-time] season in the NFL was very special and very exciting -- we ended up beating the Patriots in Super Bowl XLII. I remain very humbled by the experience, as I know there are many athletic trainers that work many years in this league and never make it to a Super Bowl, let alone be part of the winning team.

For me, it was never as much nerves as it was just embracing the opportunity and looking forward to the challenges that lie ahead when working in this setting. Having worked for the Giants for three training camps and the previous full season as an intern, I was comfortable with the staff, players, coaches, and the way things are done, but I was looking forward to the new role and added responsibilities. As with anything I think you need to be confident in yourself, your education and training. I had all the appropriate skills, now it was the time to use them. I also have the luxury of working with three other certified athletic trainers on staff with a combined 60+ years of experience. I knew if there is something I was not certain of or needed guidance I'd be able to count on them.

#### **What does it take to be a good athletic trainer? Any advice for aspiring athletic trainers who want to work in collegiate or professional sports?**

I think good athletic trainers have to be able to adapt and cannot be fearful of change. Medicine and healthcare in the NFL is constantly evolving. Our owners, management and players expect the best care possible, and it is our responsibility to deliver that to them. As athletic trainers we must strive to stay current on the scientific literature, treatment techniques, and advances in sports medicine, which may mean changing the way you think or changing the way you have done things in the past. Good athletic trainers know how to deal with the different personalities of their athletes, are not afraid to make an unpopular decision, are good team players, and are not afraid to roll up their sleeves and work hard.

The best advice for an aspiring athletic trainer is to find a mentor, someone who you can learn from, someone who will be honest and upfront with you, even if they provide the answers that you sometimes do not want to hear. I have had many mentors along the way, and have been able to take pieces from each of them to develop my own philosophies and ideas. My mentor told me never to lose your compassion for people, the ability to be objective, and to always do the right thing. These are words I have not only kept with me in my current job setting, but also through all walks of life.

*Kaitlin Madden is a writer and blogger for CareerBuilder.com and its job blog, [The Work Buzz](#). She researches and writes about job search strategy, career management, hiring trends and workplace issues. Follow @CBForJobSeekers on Twitter.*

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Story Filed Tuesday, November 09, 2010 - 3:48 PM

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