

MUCH MORE THAN A SPONGE MAN *by Cameron Reid BSc (Hons) DO*

Cameron Reid explains the role and rewards of becoming an amateur club 'team trainer'

The rise of big-money professional team sport has had a kind of trickle-down effect on amateur clubs, bringing for many a welcome revival of their fortunes, fan base and public interest. Along with a wide-spread increase in standards of coaching and play at amateur level, has come much-needed injections of financial support and sponsorship. Which means that these days there is real pressure on amateur clubs to get organised and deliver positive results.

Medical cover - whether during games or training - is now being seen as a necessity. Clubs realise that pitch-side care from a suitably qualified professional is vital. And they expect rather more from this role - often described as 'team trainer' - than someone who just runs on to the pitch at dramatic moments. This article looks at the role of the amateur club team trainer.

A duty of care

Every club, professional or amateur, has a duty of care to its participants. In many professional clubs this duty is carried out by an entire team of support staff

In amateur sport the team trainer may be simply an enthusiastic parent or a keen supporter who wants to help out. However, all clubs should have minimum support standards, including at least one qualified, competent first-aider pitch-side whenever players are training and on match days. At the very least, the team trainer should carry a current first aid qualification.

Some sports governing bodies run more specific first aid and sports-injury courses aimed at trainers, to equip them with the theoretical knowledge and practical skills to handle match-day incidents, as well as advice on injury prevention. Your role will be much more rewarding as your knowledge and experience grow. You might, for instance, be involved in team warm-up and cool-down drills, making sure that kit and equipment are in full working order, and supervising or carrying out rehabilitation drills for injury recovery on training nights.

Limits of the role

It is very important to know your limitations. If you are a certified first aider then that is what your role should be. The idea of first aid is to preserve life or stabilize the injured until someone more qualified reaches the scene; having a go is not an option, even if you also have 'background' sports knowledge (for instance, as a fitness instructor or massage therapist).

I have been confronted with situations on the field of play that were new to me. With experience you can often tell a serious incident as it occurs. I have had to deal with a fractured skull, broken wrists, patella dislocations and ACL ruptures. In all but one situation we were able to transport the player off the pitch safely until an ambulance arrived; in the one incident, moving the player was risky as the extent of injury was unknown, so removal from the field of play was left to the emergency services.

How to make the job your own

How far you are able to extend your role and integrate into the life of the team will depend on a range of factors, including your own available time, professional abilities and limitations, other staff and volunteer roles at the club, your personality and that of the key individuals running the team and the club.

If you are new to the club, make sure everyone (not just the players) is aware of who you are and what you do. You can get the word out and your face known effectively by attending a players' meeting and pre-season training sessions, and by posting information on the club website. This is important: if players and staff only ever think of you as the 'sponge man', the rest of your abilities will be wasted and your role will be frustratingly limited.

Once started with a club, arrange to see each player in turn alter training and take down all contact details so you start to build up individual record cards. The player's profile should include treatment records, full name contact details, next of kin/guardian, and any important medical information such as allergies, diabetes, asthma, etc. I also tend to record what other sports they play and what training they do outside the club: this can be useful when dealing with injuries.

Record cards should be kept under lock and key in the training room. The information is private and should remain so. On match days, have record cards readily at hand, whether home or away, primarily so that if there is a serious injury you are able to contact the right people.

You must keep records of treatment given, however basic, and even if you are really busy. Short notes on the nature of injury, and any first aid administered, would suffice.

Touchline support

The moment will inevitably come when you have to attend to an injured player on the sports field. The rules of the particular sport will dictate the protocols, so it is vital that you familiarize yourself with them. The emergency bag should be in your charge at all times. Keep it closed and do not allow anybody to have free access to it.

I usually also wear a bum bag containing essentials, as it's easy to take onto the pitch. Agree in advance with the manager how to communicate with the touchline. Specific hand signals directed at the dug-out/bench will speed up communication and help to decide the next course of action, such as substitution or further medical help.

You may have to decide on the spot whether to allow an injured player to play on; be prepared for them not appreciating your decision! Never risk the future career of any athlete; if in doubt, take them off.

First aid and emergency kit

The exact contents and quantities will depend on the event and the players you have. A portable couch can be very useful. Bear in mind that some teams may not have their own trainer so you may end up working for both sides. It's a good idea to clarify early on who pays for the contents of the bag - in the past I have found myself doing so!

I usually make my own ice packs from a plastic food freezer bag full of ice, plus a splash of water to take the ice off freezing so it's less likely to cause an ice burn. For away games, take a cool box with your ice packs, plus some instant ones. You should also carry the player profile cards, a couple of pens, a mobile phone, and a notepad.

All this kit must be maintained, and any used items replaced. A scoop stretcher and inflatable splints should be readily at hand. At away matches, especially if you are visiting the ground for the first time, introduce yourself to opposing officials. You need to know any emergency procedures relating to that ground.

Maintain confidentiality

Most club trainers have done a basic sports injury course and may give massages and simple stretches to players. The changing room often doubles as a treatment area. Any treatment should be carried out in private; it is often here that players reveal information to you. A conflict of interests may arise between player and management, often to do with the player's fitness to play. This must remain confidential: avoid any temptation to mention such conversations to the manager. Always remember you are the trainer, not the coach and not the manager.

If you have enough time to make the necessary commitment and are willing to improve your medical skills, amateur team trainer is a very rewarding role. There are plenty of amateur teams out there who require trainers; so finding one should not be very difficult. There are also many courses at all levels to help you improve your skills, which should give you increased satisfaction from the job.

Follow-on reading

Flegel M J: *Sport First Aid*. Human Kinetics 1992. An excellent, readable follow-on after a first aid course.

Mellion, Walsh, Shelton. *Team Physician's Handbook*. Hanley & Belfus, 2001. This book is more in-depth but an easy read that you can dip in and out of.

Cameron Reid read Human Biology at the University of Surrey where he specialised in Ergonomics. He then spent a year in the Department of Ergonomics, University of Zurich. This gave him a valuable insight into how mans' working environment affects him physically. He graduated from the British School of Osteopathy in 1986, and became a clinical tutor at the school for a further 2 years.

Cameron Reid is an osteopath who has worked with both professional and amateur football clubs in the UK. Alongside his private practice he runs training in ergonomics, manual handling and pitch side care and injury rehabilitation.

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