

*Note: To read about UCO's alumni who are professional athletic trainers, visit UCO's alumni and news page for the College of Education and Professional Studies at <https://sites.uco.edu/ceps/alumni-news> and click on Normal Archive 2017.*

## **Stretching out a profession:**

### **Athletic trainer requirements become more stringent as demand increases**

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**OKLAHOMA CITY** – The route to becoming an athletic trainer is becoming tougher. But the profession is expanding into industries beyond sports, including the military and industrial workplaces, creating more demand for those credentialed people.

Mercy athletic trainer Zane Brughenmke said the increasing educational requirements for athletic trainers follow a similar trajectory as physical therapists. Physical therapists will be required to get a postdoctoral degree by 2020, whereas the profession required a bachelor's degree years ago. Brughenmke, who is the head athletic trainer for the Energy FC soccer team, said the higher degree requirements will reinforce the notion that those professionals are health care providers.

Jeff McKibbin is the graduate athletic training curriculum director for the University of Central Oklahoma. Degree programs must have all educational requirements in place by 2020 and anyone entering the field must enroll in a graduate program beginning in fall 2022, he said. UCO's program follows a nursing program model, in which students have class time and clinical experience in the field. Students learn how to wrap injured limbs, how to tape joints to prevent injuries, how to start an IV, how to intubate a person and how to do simple sutures.

He agreed with Brughenmke that the graduate degree requirement for certified athletic trainers creates awareness that those professionals are a subset of the health care industry.

“The rigor of getting into the profession is obviously higher, so you will have a higher-quality (job candidate) when they graduate and enter the workforce,” McKibbin said.

Joe Sharpe, chairman of the National Basketball Athletic Trainers Association, said he didn't expect there to be a shortage of athletic trainers who have graduate degrees entering the workforce in coming years. He said he recently spoke with the National Athletic Trainers Association president, who told Sharpe there are plenty of graduate-level university programs to fill the nationwide demand.

But there's already a wide gap in Oklahoma for high school sports athletic trainers, Brughenmke said. Though he is the head athletic trainer for Energy FC, he and staff members at Mercy work with several metro high schools to provide certified ATs for athletes through a grant program with the National Football League. Only 9 percent of high schools in the state have an

athletic trainer and only 30 percent have access to one, he said. Nationwide, the average is about 75 percent for high schools.

“For a state that is so into athletics, I come here three years ago as an outsider and it’s like, really, what is going on here?” Brughenhemke said.

Athletic trainers can often work on a contract basis. McKibbin said about 43 percent of Oklahoma high schools have an AT working in some capacity.

“So that’s 57 percent of high schools that go without health care for their athletes,” McKibbin said. “That means a delay in their healing, but it can also be a life-and-death situation.”

There’s plenty of work outside of college and professional sports for potential candidates interested in the field, such as rodeo and in the arts. The military has been using athletic trainers for the better part of a decade. Of his 56 graduates, two are working with Paralympic sitting volleyball teams, one works with the military, one works for USA Softball, and another is starting the first international program in Jordan. Sharpe said when Cirque du Soleil toured through the state, the staff sought his experience for contacts to trainers and physicians. ***To read about UCO’s alumni who are professional athletic trainers, visit UCO’s alumni and news page for the College of Education and Professional Studies at <https://sites.uco.edu/ceps/alumni-news> and click on Normal Archive 2017.***

In other states, Brughenhemke said industrial companies are hiring athletic trainers to help workers adjust their workstations so the equipment is more ergonomically correct for each person, reducing the risk of repetitive stress injuries. Those trainers are also available to treat workers if they’re injured or help with rehabilitation if they return to work after an injury.

Sharpe said as more industries branch out and hire athletic trainers, there will be more varied opportunities for graduate students to have rotations, similar to the clinic work nurses and other medical professionals do during schooling. Those rotations generally last about 15 weeks and students take one round per semester and one for the summer. That will allow more prospective athletic trainers to find a field that works best for them, he said.

The national association has certified 50,000 professionals and Sharpe said he would not be surprised if it continues to grow.

“The standards will continue to rise over time,” Sharpe said. “It took a while to get to this point and the next bump (up) will be sooner.”

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