



**Testimony of the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA)  
U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation**

**“Current Issues in American Sports: Protecting the Health and Safety of American Athletes”**

**Wednesday, May 17, 2017**

On behalf of the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA), I am pleased to have the opportunity to provide testimony to the United States Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee on the important topic of protecting the health and safety of American athletes. My name is Scott R. Sailor and I am the President of NATA and Chair of the Department of Kinesiology and Program Director for the Athletic Training Program at Fresno State University.

NATA is a professional organization serving more than 46,000 certified athletic trainers, students of athletic training, and other health care professionals. Protecting the health and safety of athletes is exactly what NATA members have been doing since the organization was founded in 1950.

**Background on the Athletic Training Profession**

The mission of NATA is to represent, engage, and foster the continued growth and development of the athletic training profession and athletic trainers as unique health care providers. Athletic trainers are health care professionals who collaborate with physicians to provide preventative services, emergency care, clinical diagnosis, therapeutic intervention, and rehabilitation of injuries. As part of the health care team, services provided by athletic trainers include injury and illness prevention, wellness promotion and education, emergent care, examination and clinical diagnosis, and therapeutic intervention.

Athletic trainers provide urgent and acute care of injuries; they specialize in preventing, diagnosing, and treating muscle and bone injuries. Athletic trainers are included under the allied health professions category as defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and are assigned National Provider Identifier numbers. In addition to employment by sports and athletic organizations, athletic trainers are employed by hospitals, clinics, occupational health departments, wellness facilities, the United States military, and numerous other health care settings.

Athletic trainers are highly qualified, multi-skilled health care professionals. To provide appropriate care for patients, athletic trainers receive training in prevention, recognition, and treatment of critical situations. They must graduate from an accredited baccalaureate or master's program and it is required that athletic trainers' academic curriculum and clinical training follow the medical model. Leaders of key athletic training organizations, including NATA, have jointly decided to change the athletic training degree level to be a master's; this change is in process and will become effective by 2022. Currently, 70 percent of athletic trainers already have advanced degrees beyond a bachelor's degree. Athletic trainers are licensed or otherwise regulated in 49 states and the District of Columbia.

Using a medical-based education model, athletic trainers serve as allied health professionals with an emphasis on clinical reasoning skills. The curriculum of an accredited athletic training program must include a comprehensive basic and applied science background and uses a competency based approach in both the classroom and clinical settings.

Athletic training education programs are accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education (CAATE), which is recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. The CAATE sets forth rigorous standards for the preparation of athletic training graduates that are science-based and didactic. CAATE also administers post-professional athletic training residency programs.

Upon completion of an accredited athletic training program, athletic trainers are required to pass a comprehensive examination administered by the Board of Certification, Inc. (BOC). The BOC certification program ensures that individuals have the knowledge and skills necessary to perform the tasks critical to safe and competent practice as an athletic trainer. Athletic trainers who pass the BOC's examination are awarded the ATC® credential.

### **Athlete Health and Safety Issues**

NATA has long been a leader in bringing a voice to the many health and safety issues facing athletes. We are actively engaged in providing our expertise and specific recommendations to policymakers at the local, state, and federal levels.

As a health professional organization, we pride ourselves on staying informed of the latest research findings and reports related to athlete safety. The athletic trainers involved in conducting research and analyzing sports injuries are doing outstanding work. However, NATA urges Congress to fully invest in efforts to track youth sports injuries and fatalities. It is only with a comprehensive system for collecting and analyzing this data that we will be able to understand the scope of the problem and the best methods for addressing it.

Based upon current studies and reports, the following statistics provide the best snapshot of the relationship between athletic participation and sports-related injuries in the United States:

- 420,000 college-level athletes experience 209 million injuries per year;
- 7.6 million secondary school athletes experience 1.4 million injuries per year;
- 46.5 million children playing team sports experience 1.35 million injuries per year;
- 62% of injuries occur during practice; and
- 1.6 to 3.8 million sports-related concussions occur every year.

In 2013, there were 1.24 million emergency room visits by children 19 years of age and under for injuries related to sports; that is 3,397 visits per day, 141 per hour, and 1 every 25 seconds.

These injury statistics are compelling, but to athletic trainers, the most concerning fact is that the secondary school athletic population leads the nation in athletic-related deaths. Between 2008 and 2015, there have been more than 300 sports-related fatalities among young athletes. Let me underscore this fact; in a seven-year period, we lost over 300 children who were merely playing sports. As a nation, we must do a better job in protecting youth athletes.

Athletic trainers are experts in creating and applying strategies to prevent and reduce the many different causes of sudden death in athletic participation. The underlying causes of sudden death in athletics might include asthma, catastrophic brain injuries, cervical spine injuries, diabetes, exertional heat stroke, and sudden cardiac arrest, which is the leading cause of death in young athletes.

NATA supports proposals to ensure that every high school with an athletics department has a full-time athletic trainer on staff to monitor the health of student athletes. However, only an estimated 42% of high schools employ a full-time athletic trainer. We must improve access to athletic trainers in secondary schools and youth-sports organizations.

The investment in proper safety measures and providing adequate medical supervision, such as a full-time athletic trainer, for sports practices and games is not costly when compared to the loss of a young life to injury that may have been prevented or properly treated.

NATA further advocates for the implementation of emergency action plans for all sporting events and venues. These plans, developed in conjunction with a health care team, ensure a plan of action is in place in case of injury, whether minor or catastrophic.

## NATA's Leadership on Youth Athlete Safety Issues

In 2010, NATA founded the Youth Sports Safety Alliance (YSSA), which is now comprised of nearly 290 organizations. The members of YSSA range from parent advocate groups, research institutions, professional associations, health care organizations, and youth sports leagues.

Organized sports bring enormous health benefits to children but certain factors may cause them to ignore pain and injuries, which could result in lifelong injuries or even death. NATA is working to preserve amateur and professional sports, but we must also ensure that sports are played safely and that when injuries occur, we are adequately prepared to respond.

NATA has worked on a number of other partnerships and initiatives to bring attention to youth athlete safety issues at a local, state, and national level including the following:

- NATA Safe Sports School Award: Since 2013, NATA has sponsored the Safe Sports School Award, a program designed to establish a standard for secondary school athlete safety and recognize those athletic programs that excel in taking all the necessary steps to ensure athlete safety. To date, there have been more than 1,100 schools that have received the award.
- At Your Own Risk Campaign: NATA has developed a public awareness campaign, At Your Own Risk, aimed specifically at educating parents, student athletes, school administrators, legislators, and employers on the role of athletic trainers as experts in prevention and safety in work, life, and sport.
- Annual Youth Sports Safety Leaders Event: NATA partners with the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine, the Korey Stringer Institute, and the National Football League (NFL) in organizing "Collaborative Solutions for Safety in Sports," an annual event among youth sports safety leaders from every state to discuss emergency action planning and coaching education in secondary schools.
- Athletic Trainers in Underserved High Schools: Over the past several years, NATA has partnered with the NFL Foundation, Gatorade, and the Professional Football Athletic Trainers Society to fund multimillion dollar efforts to place athletic trainers in underserved high schools.
- Publications on Best Practices: NATA continues to publish resources on best practices related to preventing sudden death in secondary school athletics,

concussion, heat acclimatization, emergency action plans, lightning safety, and other emerging athlete safety issues.

### Promoting Physical Activity

Athletic trainers more than any other health profession understand the physical and mental health benefits of an active lifestyle. While NATA has been engaged in raising awareness of youth athlete safety issues, we have remained just as steadfast in our efforts to promote the benefits of physical activity and sports. NATA has had both of these issues at the top of its federal legislative agenda for many years.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Prevention Strategy "outlines the importance of preventive care and recognizes that active living is important to reducing the burden of disease and death." According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines, "adults who are physically active are healthier and less likely to develop many chronic diseases than adults who are not active – regardless of their gender or ethnicity."

Further statistics show that participation in sport helps children develop and improve cognitive skills. Physical activity in general is associated with improved academic achievement, including grades and standardized tests scores. Such activity can affect attitudes and academic behavior, including enhanced concentration and attention and improved classroom behavior. Physical activity and sports in particular can positively affect aspects of personal development among young people, such as self-esteem, goal setting, and leadership. Moreover, high school athletes are more likely than non-athletes to graduate from high school, attend college, and receive a degree.

On Tuesday, May 16, 2017, NATA members were on Capitol Hill, urging Members of Congress to support the *Personal Health Investment Today Act* or the *PHIT Act*. This legislation provides an incentive for adults and their children to get fit, which will help prevent health care costs related to preventable chronic diseases. I would like to thank Chairman Thune for being the lead sponsor of the bill in the Senate and to thank Senators Wicker and Baldwin for being cosponsors. I would encourage the other members of the Senate Commerce Committee to cosponsor the PHIT Act.

Also, NATA has taken a leadership role within a number of national coalitions involved in promoting physical activity issues. NATA's Director of Government Affairs, Amy Callender, represents us on the Board of Directors of the National Physical Activity Plan Alliance and she is the President of the Board of Directors of the National Coalition to Promote Physical Activity.

### **The Opioid and Prescription Drug Epidemic**

The widespread availability and abuse of prescription opioids and heroin has been recognized as a public health crisis by both lawmakers and the public.

In 2016, an estimated one in five patients with non-cancer pain or pain-related diagnoses was prescribed an opioid. In many cases, addiction to prescription opioids can lead to abuse of less expensive heroin. In 2014, there were 18,893 overdose deaths related to prescription pain relievers and 10,574 overdose deaths related to heroin.

Athletic trainers can play an important role in promoting safe opioid use and preventing opioid abuse. Sports injuries may result in a student being prescribed an opioid pain medication, putting student athletes at a higher risk for abusing those medications. Athletic trainers are uniquely positioned to help with the prevention of opioid abuse and successful rehabilitation from injury amongst student athletes.

If a student athlete is prescribed an opioid, the athletic trainer at his or her school should be informed so they can assist with monitoring the student's usage and recovery progress. Opioid overdoses can be reversed when the lifesaving drug naloxone is promptly administered. NATA supports proposals to increase access to and training in administering naloxone, including amongst athletic trainers.

In October 2015, the Obama Administration encouraged federal, state, local, and private sector entities to address the prescription drug abuse and heroin epidemic. NATA was invited to participate in this effort and we shared educational materials on opioid misuse prevention with our entire membership.

We were strong advocates for the passage of the *Comprehensive Addiction and Recovery Act* or *CARA*. Also, NATA has provided comments and recommendations on National Pain Strategy and we were represented at the recently held "Implementation of the National Pain Strategy Listening Session" hosted by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health.

NATA also supports S. 786, the *Student and Student Athlete Opioid Misuse Prevention Act*, introduced by New Hampshire Senator Jeanne Shaheen. The bill is focused on preventing opioid abuse amongst students, and particularly amongst student athletes. The bill authorizes new federal grant funding to support programs for students and student athletes, as well as training for teachers, administrators, and athletic trainers.

### **Other Federal Legislative and Regulatory Policy Issues**

As the leading organization representing athletic trainers, NATA fully supports Chairman Thune's *Sports Medicine Licensure Clarity Act*. I would also like to thank Senator Wicker for being a cosponsor of the bill.

The *Sports Medicine Licensure Clarity Act* clarifies medical liability rules for athletic trainers and other medical professionals to ensure they are properly covered by their liability insurance while traveling with athletic teams in another state.

The legislation has the support of the Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons, the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine, the American Academy of Neurology, and numerous other physician and sports medicine organizations. Additionally, the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee, the National Collegiate Athletic Association, and every major American professional sports league have endorsed the bill.

The House version of the bill, H.R. 302, passed on January 9, 2017 and awaits action by the United States Senate. This week, most Senate offices were visited by athletic trainers requesting support for this legislation. I want to join my fellow athletic trainers and the more than 46,000 members of NATA in urging members of the United States Senate, including the members of this Committee, to cosponsor the *Sports Medicine Licensure Clarity Act*.

Thank you for this opportunity to present the views of the National Athletic Trainers' Association and I welcome your questions.