



ptaviewpoint

by Kimberly Tucker, PTA, ATC, CSCS

Sporting Dual Credentials

A PTA “ups her game.”

My path to a career in physical therapy, like those of many physical therapist assistants (PTAs), did not start immediately after I graduated from high school. Although I always was interested in health and fitness, I found a deeper, more meaningful interest in rehabilitation and physical therapy during an internship at the Center for Sports Medicine in Chattanooga while I was completing the requirements for a bachelor of science degree in exercise physiology at the University of Tennessee.

After graduating, I accepted the Center for Sports Medicine’s offer of employment as a physical therapy technician. I had many exceptional learning experiences while working at this facility, including the ability to observe orthopedic surgeries and gain a better understanding of orthopedic and sports patients’ surgical experience, rehabilitation, and recovery. Most exciting for me was the opportunity to work with professional athletes. I was impressed by their motivation to return to their sport, and the attention to detail and technique involved in their rehabilitation. It was hard not to share with my family and friends the names of the famous athletes I encountered.

In 1996, I volunteered at the Olympic Games’ whitewater team trials in slalom kayak/canoe and the World Cup I in slalom kayak/canoe, and observed athletic trainers evaluating injuries and initiating treatment of elite athletes. Wow! What could be more exciting than this? I was

hooked. I knew that a career in sports rehabilitation was what I wanted to pursue, so I began taking athletic training courses while continuing to work.

Eventually I decided to return to school full-time to prepare for my career in sports rehabilitation. My husband had accepted a position near Seattle, Washington. Because there were no athletic training programs nearby, I decided to pursue a degree in physical therapy first. I entered the PTA program at Whatcom Community College in Bellingham, Washington, and received my PTA degree in 2000.

While in the PTA program, I worked part-time in a local hospital’s outpatient physical therapy clinic, which exposed me to all areas of rehabilitation, including cardiac rehab and aquatic therapy. I also earned a telemetry technician certificate, which has benefited me in the cardiopulmonary aspects of rehabilitation.

The PTA program faculty at Whatcom encouraged continuing education and arranged for several of us to go to a 4-day aquatic symposium offered by the Aquatic Therapy & Rehab Institute Inc. This was my introduction to aquatic physical therapy and my first experience teaching others—through in-service education to my peers. Throughout my time in the PTA program, I retained my goal of working in sports physical therapy and focused on sports performance and orthopedic aquatic therapy.

Because of my passion for physical therapy, I volunteered as a community resource trainer, teaching area high

school students about physical therapy and encouraging them to consider it as a career option. Having returned to my home state of Tennessee, I have continued promoting the profession as a guest speaker in first aid and rehabilitation classes at local high schools.

Upon arrival in Tennessee I accepted a PTA position with BenchMark Physical Therapy in the town of Cleveland. It’s a private outpatient facility that focuses heavily on manual therapy. At the time I started there, BenchMark was beginning a sports medicine program with local high schools. This gave me an opportunity to complete my athletic training field hours under the supervision of a licensed athletic trainer, as is required in order to take the three-part athletic training examination that includes practical, written simulation, and multiple-choice sections. The next 2 years consisted of long days and short weekends, as I followed the school’s athletic schedule to obtain the required field hours—over and above my 40-hour work week in the clinic.

In 2004, with my field hours and all three examinations completed, I became a certified athletic trainer. These were tough years, but my determination to serve athletes kept me focused. Since then, I have covered athletic venues for local high schools and colleges, and for the World Basketball Association.

My educational requirements and work as an athletic trainer differ significantly from my education and work as a PTA. As an athletic trainer, my role includes injury prevention, evalua-

tion, and diagnosis, as well as front-line care. Being first on the athletic field requires that trainers know the signs and symptoms of a variety of sports-related injuries, be able to test neurological and musculoskeletal integrity, and manage emergency situations. Trainers also must learn the rules of a variety of sports, their typical training and game-preparation techniques, and the terminology commonly used by coaches and athletes.

Also, coaches and athletes frequently ask the trainer's advice regarding nutrition and strength training. To improve my ability to knowledgeably answer these questions, I completed strength and conditioning specialist certification. How, I reasoned, was I to assess a power clean or dead lift if I didn't know the proper technique? The correct technique is important, after all, not only in rehabilitation, but also in sports performance. Overall, my education and experiences as a certified athletic trainer have contributed to my effectiveness and efficiency in sports physical therapy.

One of the advantages of my dual degrees has been a broader knowledge base for rehabilitation. As a "senior" PTA at BenchMark, I have the privilege of mentoring others—which is not to say that my learning is complete. Within my dual roles, I continue to learn about sports medicine and strive for excellence in sports physical therapy rehabilitation. The pursuit of excellence requires ongoing continuing education, as I seek always to keep up with the latest developments in surgical procedures, changing concepts in rehabilitation, advances in evidence-based practice, and the needs of higher-level athletes.

As a recipient of APTA's Recognition of Advanced Proficiency for the Physical Therapist Assistant in musculoskeletal physical therapy, I encourage every PTA to take advantage of this program and to strive for clinical excellence in spe-

cialty areas. Per Vision 2020,¹ every PTA and physical therapist is responsible for advancing our profession and raising the bar of clinical excellence. Stagnation is not an option. Each of us must be involved and take an evidence-based approach to our work, guided by the APTA Code of Ethics² and the Guide for Conduct of the Physical Therapist Assistant.³ As PTAs, it is our duty to uphold these documents and follow through by taking responsibility for our future—equipping ourselves with as much knowledge as possible, for the benefit of our patients and the profession.

My desire to be involved with sports medicine and athletes led me into the "wide world of sports," and the high standards of the profession of physical

therapy and my own call of duty drive me constantly to "up my game." What about you? **PT**

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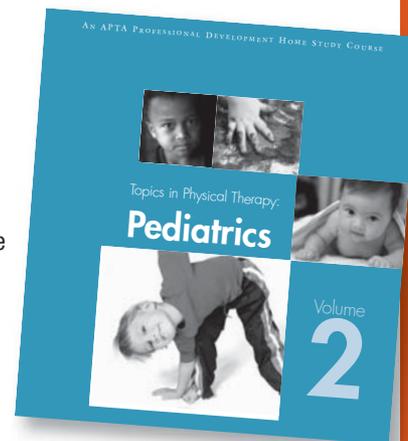
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