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Lamorinda athletic trainers behind the scenes

By Jon Kingdon



From left: Chris Clark, Ray Albiento and John Grigsby Photos Gint Federas

From the start of every sporting event, there is one group in particular that hopes to be able to remain completely anonymous - the athletic trainers. The last thing that they want to hear after a play is a call for "Trainer!" The trainer has to be prepared for every situation as a player's injury may range from something as minor as a leg cramp to a life-and-death situation.

Though athletic training began in 1881 when Harvard University hired the first trainer, it has been a long and steady process for high schools, colleges and even professional teams to see the value of having full-time trainers on staff. It was not until 1959 that athletic training programs became available as a major at some colleges. As the programs developed, athletic training became defined as "health care professionals who specialize in preventing, recognizing, managing and rehabilitating injuries."

High schools around the country have rapidly come to understand the advantage of having a full-time trainer on staff. In 1994, only 35 percent of the schools had access to an athletic trainer. In 2015, 70 percent of U.S. public high schools had athletic training services while 37 percent had full-time athletic trainers. Forty-seven percent of the schools reported providing full practice coverage each afternoon.

The Lamorinda schools have had great stability with their athletic trainers. Chris Clark has been at Acalanes for the past 15 years, Ray Albiento has been at Campolindo for 14 years and John Grigsby has been the trainer at Miramonte for 13 years. Grigsby was just awarded the Far West Athletic Trainers Association Excellence in Athletic Training Award for the fall quarter of 2018, which is given to the trainer who displays exceptional commitment to mentoring, professional development and enhancing the quality of health care.

Besides serving as the trainers for every sport at their respective schools, they all teach classes as well. Clark began as a trainer and took it a step further: "I fell in love with teaching. I have two sports medicine and three PE classes. It's an introduction to sports medicine and showing them the roles that other medical professionals can play. My advanced classes are for students that are interested in pursuing a career in the medical field."

Grigsby also teaches sports medicine as well as a class in human and social development for sophomores and he challenges his students to look to the future: "I want to see what the students know about technology. One assignment I give them is to try and come up with new inventions in our classes."

Teaching was not something that Albiento had anticipated doing: "I never thought I would become a teacher but, with the opportunities to teach sports medicine, I found that I loved teaching. I've seen a number of my students go on to be doctors, physicians assistants, trainers, nurses, EMTs, dieticians and strength coaches."

Though football is the only sport that is required to have a trainer on site for every game, no sport is overlooked, says Clark: "We cover all of our contests for us and the visiting teams."

"We're required to be at every event that is at our home field," says Albiento. "We put in a ton of hours and it helps that we have a great group of trainers in our district."

Grigsby welcomes the challenge of covering all the games: "It's more of a personal goal for me to provide for all of the sports. We get a great deal of help from the parents and boosters who help to provide the necessary equipment and supplies for all of our sports."

The ounce of prevention philosophy has become a significant aspect of the trainers' responsibilities, says Grigsby: "It's preventing the injury before it occurs. Strength conditioning is key to keeping the athletes healthy. We've found that increased neck strength helps to prevent concussion susceptibility."

With the help of the boosters, Acalanes was able to hire Logan Beal as its strength and conditioning coach, who has helped Clark in many ways: "Logan has allowed us to institute a program of exercise prescription in preventing injuries. Our girls' water polo team (which was undefeated) showed how important it is to strength train and maintain. They put all the work in with Logan and we found they had much fewer repetitive muscle injuries. We've found similar success with our track program as well. The athletes and coaches have bought into the program."

Albiento has also seen a decrease in knee injuries due to their strength program: "We've seen fewer ACL injuries due to more strength and conditioning. Before 2009, we did not have a strength and conditioning coach. Now we have two. With our teams working with the coaches in the offseason, we've seen a major decrease in significant injuries when we strengthen their bodies as a whole."

Football is the most collision- and injury-prone sport, requiring the most attention of the trainers and demanding their greatest efforts. "It takes a lot of preparation," says Grigsby. "We're the first to arrive and the last to leave. We oversee the necessary equipment, the water boys and girls and are alert to contact the first responders if necessary. On every play, I watch the athletes get up and down."

The trainer is responsible for both teams when the visiting team has not brought their trainer, says Clark: "I will get the Gatorade and water jugs ready for both teams. There are pregame treatments and taping and setting up the sidelines. I will have 10-14 of my students helping, studying and observing on the sidelines. I try to keep up with the game but the fact is I am concerned from the opening kickoff until the last play of the game. I hate to hear the call for a trainer but that's why I'm there."

With the advent of Title IX and the exponential growth of girls participating in sports, the trainers work with the girls' teams as well. Clark treats all of the athletes equally, regardless of gender: "Athletes are athletes and all of them are individuals. They have signed up to play sports of their own volition and want to be a part of it. There is equality in the training room. Whoever arrives first gets treated first. I was a trainer with USA Volleyball and have covered a lot of female-centered events and the exposure has enabled me to understand female athletes. Not every athlete is created equal in their ability to handle pain, whether male or female. I've found that in many cases, the girls are tougher than the guys."

As in most fields, things change and evolve, says Albiento: "A master's degree is now required to become a certified athletic trainer. We're not seeing as many multiple sport athletes as we used to. They play one sport and after the season, they will go on to play for a club team."

Computer technology has become an excellent tool for the trainers, according to Grigsby: "Robotics engineering is helping with surgeries and rehabilitation, not only in sports but with our war veterans. We now use computer baselines for concussion management, checking the kids' reaction times and memories. It's also used for strength, conditioning and performance enhancement."

Still, some things just don't change, according to Clark: "Anatomy is still anatomy. However, science has caught up with what we have been dealing with all along. We are all better positioned to deal with concussions and brain injuries. There are better and much less invasive surgeries and regenerative therapy. The future is bright as it relates to athletic injuries and treatment."

The trainers will have the last word as to whether a player can return to practice and playing after an injury despite the efforts of some of the athletes, says Clark: "Kids will get notes from doctors, going 'doc-shopping,' to find a doctor that will clear them to play, particularly with concussions. The district policy is that no player can get back onto the field unless he is cleared by the trainer. We have had great backing from the schools, the district and the administration. If we need to push back, they will back us."

Each trainer took different paths in making training their career. Ironically, it was an injury that led Albiento that pointed him in that direction: "I was a pitcher at St. Joseph-Notre Dame High School in Alameda when I tore the cartilage in my shoulder. After having surgery, I was sent to Bay Area Physical Therapy where the A's and Warriors would go for treatment. Coincidentally my trainer was Chris Clark's father-in-law. I loved the environment and thought that it would be an awesome job."

Clark, who went to St. Mary's High School in Berkeley, got his first job as a trainer returning to St. Mary's High School after his certification. It was a relative of Clark's who had suffered some mini-strokes that led him to become a trainer: "My grandfather had a hard time moving and I would help him move his legs. I would talk with his physical therapist and she recommended this as a career. A teacher of mine, Stan Nakahara, a legend in his field, had his own clinic and I interned there and learned a ton from him. I loved athletics and saw this as a way to be around it."

Grigsby, who graduated from Northgate High School, took a class in athletic training which at that point was the first and only program in the Bay Area. He went on to San Diego State and graduated with a degree in kinesiology and sports medicine. Grigsby's first job was at Mount Miguel High School and then was called by Glen Barker about the opportunity to become the trainer at Miramonte and has been there ever since.

When the trainers first arrived, there was some skepticism from the coaches. "At first, it took time to develop a trust with the coaches and for them to recognize my ability and how I stood up for the kids," says Clark. "Based on how I've done things, I've gained their respect. It was a learning curve to expectations for what I was doing."

It was similar from the start for Albiento: "Initially there was a range of reactions from the coaches. Some were receptive and others had to learn why I was there. It's worked out very well since then."

Grigsby had a positive reaction from the coaches, the faculty, the parents and the community from the outset: "I could never thank them enough for welcoming me from the beginning. They all know that in our district there will always be a trainer on the fields and in the gyms."

There is a unanimous belief that athletic training is a growth industry. Clark cites how many females are pursuing this field: "There is more diversity in athletic training each year. I have a large number of females in my sports medicine classes. I constantly remind them that their background and gender doesn't matter. What's most important is that they have to be passionate about it."

Clark points out the need for trainers in many more areas than in high schools and colleges: "It's all over the place - Cirque du Soleil, ballet companies, rodeos, NASCAR and the armed services. Even corporate settings and Federal Express see the need for biomechanics and rehabilitation."

Is there any competition between the trainers? Hardly. Clark is looking forward to getting together with the Grigsby and Albiento: "We're all going to have lunch after our schools' finals. We will talk shop and catch up. We're all family guys both personally and professionally. It's always good to catch up and talk shop."

Grigsby echoes that sentiment: "We have a great collaboration. Our schools are unique in that they all have a full-time athletic trainer. We have all have been working together. It's been good to see that other schools are following our lead and getting full-time trainers and covering all the sports."

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[back](#)

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