



# RALIANCE

Ending Sexual Violence in One Generation



## Athletic Trainers as Leaders in SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION



FEBRUARY 2021



## ATHLETIC TRAINERS AT THE FRONT LINES AND ON THE SIDE LINES

Athletic trainers (ATs) are allied health professionals focused on the prevention, examination, diagnosis, treatment, and rehabilitation of emergent, acute, or chronic injuries and medical conditions associated with sport. They are at the forefront of student-athlete health care, making evidence-based decisions informed by best available practices. ATs are critical members of the sport pipeline in youth, high school, college, and professional sports.

Athletic trainers are uniquely positioned to affect the health and wellbeing of student-athletes, aligning with a shift in the profession toward a focus on the “total student-athlete.” This perspective has encouraged sports medicine professionals to consider not only the physical but the mental and emotional wellbeing of the student-athlete as critical to their athletic success and their personal development.

A robust body of research over several decades has documented the physical and mental health outcomes associated with sexual violence among youth and young adults.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Health care professionals have focused on best practices in assessing for violence, reporting procedures when youth and young adults disclose sexual violence, and connecting survivors with needed resources. However, health care professionals – ATs in particular – are well-positioned to be leaders in **preventing** sexual violence before it happens and shaping prosocial climates that promote healthy relationship behaviors on their teams and in student-athletes’ lives outside of sport.

# PREVENTING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) outlines key strategies for the prevention of sexual violence, which may help systems consider how best to address sexual violence in the context of sport. Specifically, the CDC recommends addressing multiple domains including promoting social norms that protect against violence, teaching prosocial skills that support healthy relationships, promoting the empowerment of girls, women, and student-athletes with other minoritized identities, creating protective environments through structural supports, and providing trauma-informed resources for survivors to mitigate the physical and mental health impacts of sexual violence.<sup>5</sup> To date, evidence-based practices in sport have focused on promoting social norms that protect against violence, with coaches and student-athletes identified as important messengers and models of prosocial behavior.<sup>6</sup> For example, such programs aim to create more gender-equitable environments for their student-athletes and teach student-athletes and staff to disrupt disrespectful or abusive behavior when they witness it among their peers. However, to date, these efforts have not considered the unique and valuable role of athletic trainers and other sports medicine professionals in the sport pipeline.





## ATHLETIC TRAINERS SPEAK

**RALIANCE is a national partnership dedicated to ending sexual violence in one generation. With business and sport divisions, every day RALIANCE makes prevention possible by advancing research, influencing policy, supporting innovative programs, and helping leaders establish safe workplaces and healthy communities. RALIANCE provides a national resource center for the prevention of sexual violence in the sport industry. Through a series of reports<sup>7,8,9</sup> and an interactive website<sup>10</sup> including a database of sexual violence prevention programs designed for sport, RALIANCE has engaged in a multi-pronged strategy to explore how sport can move from contributing to the problem of SV/DV to becoming part of the solution to end it. RALIANCE has identified opportunities for sport to play its most powerful role as both an avenue to prevent sexual violence and domestic violence within its own system and a platform to spread values to end sexual violence and domestic violence in broader society.**

In 2019, RALIANCE partnered with Michigan State University (MSU) and Social Policy Research Associates (SPR) to host an invitation-only listening session that brought together athletic trainers from across the B1G (Big Ten) Conference and selected Division II and Division III universities to discuss the role of athletic trainers in sexual violence prevention. The goals of the day-long meeting were to: gather knowledge about the role of athletic trainers in informing sexual violence prevention and develop potential recommendations for needed resources, training, and collaborations to facilitate athletic trainers' role in sexual violence prevention.

Here, reflecting the perspectives of athletic trainers who participated in the listening session, we outline the unique role of athletic trainers in the sport pipeline, opportunities athletic trainers identified to promote sexual violence prevention, and the supports needed to carry out this vision.



## HOW IS THE ROLE OF THE ATHLETIC TRAINER UNIQUE IN THE SPORT PIPELINE?

- **Athletic trainers build trusting relationships with student-athletes.** ATs have unique relationships with student-athletes. Student-athletes trust them to be a sounding board and person who is there for them and will reserve judgment. For many student-athletes, facing injury and time away from sport can be difficult, so ATs work with student-athletes at their most vulnerable times during their athletic careers. Because of these relationships, athletic trainers are often more likely than coaches or administrators to see the student-athlete as a whole person.
- **Athletic trainers are resource brokers in the sport pipeline.** ATs are responsible for connecting student-athletes, parents, and coaches with the resources available throughout the athletic system. ATs are often the first contact for a student-athlete who is struggling and play the liaison role between the student-athlete and other services, including academic support, mental health, physical health, and more. They additionally have relationships with athletics administrators who may have access to critical supports in the system.



## WHY ARE ATHLETIC TRAINERS POISED TO PROMOTE SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION?

- **Athletic trainers promote physical and mental health.** Given that college-age students are still developing physically and mentally, ATs are health care providers responsible for overseeing a student-athlete's maturation, development, and safety. It is within their scope of practice to educate student-athletes about various aspects of their health, including sexual health, and what constitutes unhealthy versus healthy behaviors.
- **Athletic trainers practice and demonstrate consent every day.** In their role as health care providers, ATs explain the procedures they use to treat acute and chronic injuries and ask for permission before touching a student-athlete. They also practice confidentiality, in accordance with HIPAA, as privileged health care providers. In this way, they are teaching student-athletes what to expect from others in terms of their bodies and how to practice consent with others.
- **Athletic training rooms are central locations for student-athletes, coaches, and sports medicine professionals to come together.** Team dynamics manifest in the athletic training room. This is also a space where student-athletes intersect with other teams. Therefore, time in the athletic training room is ideal for shaping prosocial norms about healthy relationships, gender, sexuality, and bystander intervention.



## WHAT SUPPORTS DO ATHLETIC TRAINERS NEED TO BE LEADERS IN SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION?

- **Rigorous research, evaluation, and training to provide guidance for ATs to incorporate sexual violence prevention into their clinical practice.** As sexual violence prevention is not currently a focus in their education, ATs are seeking evidence-based practices to incorporate into their clinical practice. This will require multidisciplinary partnerships with researchers and practitioners in sport and sexual violence prevention, and experts in AT curriculum and instruction.
- **Athletics leadership to champion ATs' role in sexual violence prevention.** There will be a need for consistent messaging from conference commissioners down through administration that there is a role for sport to play in the prevention of sexual violence and that ATs, in particular, are well-positioned to shape change. These public statements should be bolstered by mechanisms of accountability within institutions and in the system more broadly, funding to support programmatic efforts, and staff time to do this important work.
- **Leadership to prioritize sexual violence prevention in the context of sports medicine.** Leadership from national organizations, such as the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA), can play a pivotal role toward entrenching the AT role in sexual violence prevention. Specifically, national organizations could develop best practices and mandates for minimum standards of training for athletic trainers, leading to consistency across the system. A recent example of such leadership is the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine (AMSSM)'s position statement that expressed their commitment to the development of educational resources for sports medicine physicians and fellowship trainees regarding sexual violence prevention and intervention.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, training would move beyond compliance for reporting to framing the AT role as in a position to prevent violence from happening in the first place. In other words, this movement aligns with shifts toward holistic student-athlete welfare. Additionally, these leading organizations may serve to facilitate collaborations on this issue between ATs across various levels of the sport pipeline, from youth to professional sports.

## WHAT BARRIERS DO ATHLETIC TRAINERS PERCEIVE IN THIS MOVEMENT TO BE LEADERS IN SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION?

- **Navigating the privacy and confidentiality of student-athletes.** Athletic training rooms are often open with limited space to have confidential conversations about (un)healthy relationships or sexual violence. Athletic departments would benefit from considering the ways that physical space shapes athletic trainers' ability to promote the health and safety of their student-athletes.
- **Limited mental health resources for student-athletes on campus.** ATs are resource brokers, connecting student-athletes to needed care, but they are limited by the availability of trauma-informed mental health and advocacy services in a given system. This creates concern about broaching conversations about sexual violence without appropriate supports in place to which ATs can refer.

## WHAT PRIORITY AREAS DID ATHLETIC TRAINERS IDENTIFY?

- **Leadership from the B1G, Other Power 5 Conference Commissioners, and the NATA.** There are already efforts to strengthen ATs' skills in trauma-informed response and reporting of sexual violence. It will be important for the Conference Commissioners to support a shift upstream so that ATs incorporate sexual violence prevention messaging into their scope of practice. This can be accomplished via consensus statements and public leadership of conference commissioners regarding the importance of and potential for the prevention of sexual violence using the platform of sport. NATA may consider creating space for sexual violence prevention conversations at the Annual Convention.
- **Research and evaluation regarding best practices in sexual violence prevention in the context of sport.** ATs were eager to incorporate sexual violence prevention into their efforts to promote the health and wellbeing of student-athletes. They asked for experts in sexual violence research and evaluation to share best practices for how to expand their practice in this regard, including moving beyond compliance frameworks to truly shifting athletic communities to prevent violence from happening in the first place. Recognizing that ATs are health care professionals, researchers may build on the body of literature in other health care settings to move forward expeditiously.
- **Creating a culture of collaboration in athletics regarding sexual violence prevention.** ATs are among the most well-connected professionals in the sport pipeline. To effectively prevent sexual violence, ATs may find partners in strength and conditioning coaches, academic support, and other professionals who are key in student-athlete development and success.

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