

HHLPING /// HAITI

BECAUSE EVERY BODY NEEDS AN ATHLETIC TRAINER

By Mollie Fitzgerald, ATC, with support from Kevin Melanson, MS, ATC, PES

s a student, one of the most appealing aspects of the athletic training profession was being able to help others become healthy, remain healthy and feel healthy. As athletic trainers, the time we spend providing health care to our patients not only enables us to form strong bonds with them, but it also gives us the opportunity to truly have a positive impact on the active population.

But what if the active population we treat isn't limited to an elite hockey player progressing to return to play after an MCL sprain? What if your work went beyond helping a weekend warrior return to the basketball court after an inversion ankle sprain? What if we looked around and knew we weren't treating those who need our help the most- those who don't just want to be active, but must remain active in order to work, provide for their families and simply survive?

We all know the phrase, "Every Body Needs an Athletic Trainer." It was the theme for National Athletic Training Month 2013. But who is "every body?"



TOP MIDDLE: Kevin Melanson, MS, ATC, PES, tries to find a fit for a brace for a patient at a clinic in the town of Thomonde. BOTTOM LEFT: Nicole Curtis and Chelsea Jacoby, ATC, work together to immobilize this young girl's leg after a motor vehicle accident. BOTTOM RIGHT: After evaluating this woman's lower back, former Merrimack student Mollie FitzGerald, ATC, works with her to learn stretching exercise to help alleviate her pain.

As a third year athletic training student at Merrimack College in North Andover, Mass., I was given the very unique opportunity to help people living in rural Haiti, people who need to be active in order to survive. I was one of seven members of the Merrimack community to travel to the town of Marmont on this week-long trip, part of a group who included students and faculty from athletic training and civil engineering, as well as a member of the campus ministry office. For the first time we collaborated with Project Medishare for Haiti, a non-profit organization cofounded by Merrimack alum Dr. Arthur Fournier.

PROJECT MEDISHARE FOR HAITI

As a result of both the 2010 earthquake and the stress that a normal day's physically demanding activities place on the people in rural Haiti, many suffer from and are living with limiting musculoskeletal disorders. Having started their work in 1994, Project Medishare has helped make tremendous health care improvements in areas such as maternal health and the fight against cholera. However, the care for those sustaining musculoskeletal injuries is nearly nonexistent. While the resources for proper care of these conditions- the type of care ATs can provide- are scarce, the need is high.

After a fact-finding trip in the summer of 2011, a former clinical instructor and preceptor of mine, Kevin Melanson, MS, ATC, PES, recognized the need and set out to bring athletic training to Haiti. When I heard about this initiative, I was immediately interested. I loved the idea of traveling to a foreign place and being able to combine the knowledge and skills I had gained through my athletic training education with service to those in need. I applied and was selected, along with another AT student in my graduating class, to attend the first student trip in the summer of 2012.

EMBRACING HAITI

We didn't know exactly what we'd be doing in Haiti so we spent the spring semester meeting once a week, preparing the best we could. We practiced our evaluation and rehabilitation skills, and brainstormed ways to best implement them in another culture with a language barrier and limited resources. We created culturally sensitive rehabilitation programs (written in Haitian Creole) for the

lower back, hoping to discover whether or not resources such as these could be effective in Haiti. We tried our best to ensure we would be respectful and well-received during our trip, learning about Haiti's culture, history, beliefs and even trying to learn some of the language.

Before I knew it, we were landing in the boisterous capital of Haiti. Embarking on an adventure that would forever change my perspective on athletic training- and on life.

Prior to our arrival, Kevin told us to "expect the unexpected and prepare for everything," words that I think any athletic trainer can relate to. On our first day we accompanied the civil engineering team on a hike to the top of a mountain where they would assess a water system. Trying to make use out of every moment of our trip, we used this day as an opportunity to observe and experience the daily life for people living in the town of Marmont.

The 95-degree heat made the hike very challenging. As we stopped for needed breaks, I exchanged friendly smiles with many Haitian men and women who were easily navigating the trails, hardly breaking a sweat, barefoot, and carrying heavy loads of crops or tools. We learned that many people did that difficult hike multiple times a day just to be able to farm their land and provide for their families.

In addition to lacking access to appropriate health care, we learned that worker's compensation and health insurance did not exist in Haiti. There are no "sick days," because a day off would mean no work, which would mean no money and no food for their families.

We're all well aware of how the body can deteriorate over years, even with the proper care, treatment and rest we receive here in the United States. Now imagine living in the harsh environment of rural Haiti and having to deal with even just a minor injury, like an ankle sprain. Imagine what it might look like after going weeks or months untreated while continuing to endure a daily routine full of long walks, steep hikes and strenuous farming. We learned athletic training care could not only help people in rural Haiti be active, but it would them survive.

We spent the rest of our week learning everything we could about the lifestyles and living conditions of people living in Haiti while simultaneously exposing them to the athletic training. We provided community health agents with educational workshops on simple ways to prevent and treat low back pain, evaluated and treated musculoskeletal ailments and assisted at a mobile health clinic.

We left Haiti with a greater understanding of the needs of the Haitian people and how we could better prepare for future trips. I left with a new understanding of what it meant to be an athletic trainer and a promise to myself that I would return to Haiti.

CONTINUING THE WORK

After raising awareness and conducting more fundraising, we have been able to return to Haiti twice since our first trip in the summer of 2012. During the three separate weeks we've spent in Haiti, we have empowered 36 Haitian community health agents with the knowledge necessary to help reduce back pain. We have continued to work with many of these people, using culturally-sensitive handouts on flexibility and strengthening for the knee and shoulder, as well as, general stretching and strengthening for other areas of the body. Athletic trainers collaborated with physicians, nurses and community health agents from Project Medishare to evaluate and treat more than 165 physical ailments. While we don't yet have any formalized assessment of our efforts, feedback from the community health agents has only been positive. Without prompt or inquisition, they have informed us that our exercises help with their pain, are well received by the community and are greatly needed.

Just like the profession of athletic training, the Merrimack Haiti Service Learning Initiative continues to grow and progress everyday. By focusing on establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with the Haitian people, we have been able to share laughs, create everlasting memories and make new friends. We've developed strong relationships with Project Medishare and many of the people living in the rural communities we visit.

It's safe to say the Haitian people have taught me just as much, if not more, than what we have been able to teach them. The bottom line is that every body does need an athletic trainer- even in Haiti.

To learn more about Project Medishare, visit www. merrimack.edu/haiti.