

COVID-19 Return-to-Sport Considerations for Secondary School Athletic Trainers

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Overview

To assist athletic trainers (ATs) in navigating the return to sport in secondary schools, the National Athletic Trainers' Association Secondary School Athletic Trainers' Committee (NATA SSATC) has developed the COVID-19 Return-to-Sport Recommendations for Secondary School Athletic Trainers. The core tenants of these guidelines center around administrative concerns, physical activity concerns and risk mitigation strategies. ATs should show prudence and work collaboratively with school officials to assess concerns and develop a comprehensive policy for return to sport with careful consideration of the following.

Key Areas of Consideration

Administrative Concerns

ATs should work collaboratively with their district administration and local public health officials to address administrative concerns and establish necessary policies to provide a safe return-to-sport.

- Establish a COVID-19 response team
- Review and update school communicable disease policy
- Establish pre-participation physical examination Requirements
- Assess supply and equipment needs in response to COVID-19

Physical Activity Concerns

As schools prepare for return of sport, ATs must take critical steps in advance of student athletes' return to campus in order to provide a safe environment for practice and competition.

- Prepare athletes for return to physical activity
- Prepare for heat acclimitization concerns
- Condensed or expanded preseason considerations
- Prepare for conditioning and practice session concerns

Risk Mitigation Strategies

ATs play an important role in bridging health and safety recommendations into practice. ATs should carefully consider risk mitigation strategies for their campuses.

- Prepare the facilities
- Illness reporting policies
- Promote wellness and hygiene
- Review emergency action plans



COVID-19 Return-to-Sport Considerations for the Secondary School Athletic Trainer

There are many elements surrounding return-to-sport and activities that are unknown at this time; however, athletic trainers (ATs) are continuing to prepare to provide a safe and healthy environment for student athletes. Many of the precautions ATs took pre-pandemic will remain. ATs may also be required to change many parts of their day-to-day practice in the wake of the pandemic. During this time, ATs have the unique ability to apply their diverse skill set, which integrates prevention and rehabilitation with emergency care, to help bridge policy into practice on campus. ATs must collaborate with other health care providers, state public health officials and school administrators and coaches to determine how these concepts are best applied in their communities and organizations. The NATA Secondary School Athletic Trainers' Committee (NATA SSATC) has developed the **COVID-19 Return-to-Sport Considerations for the Secondary School Athletic Trainer** to assist athletic trainers as activities on campus resume.

The main areas of consideration discussed in this document include:

- Administrative concerns
- Physical activity concerns
- Risk mitigation strategies

The information provided within this document is designed to serve as a guideline to assist schools and ATs as they prepare for the return of sport in secondary schools post pandemic. Since information related to COVID-19 is rapidly changing, these guidelines should be taken in concert with recommendations for provided by your health department (state, county or city), education board (state or local) and/or state activity association.

Key Takeaways

- Athletic trainers should assemble a COVID-19 response team to assess, develop and implement necessary administrative measures (i.e., policies and procedures) to protect the health and safety of student athletes and staff.
- Athletic trainers must work collaboratively with the athletic director and coaches to anticipate and address challenges related to the return to physical activity.
- The establishment, enhancement and implementation of risk mitigation strategies is paramount to the health and safety of those on campus. ATs can position themselves as a trusted voice of authority to educate and gain adherence to hygiene and health recommendations from local, state and national public health authorities.
- Athletic trainers are an integral component to providing a safe return-to-sport for both student athletes and staff.

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Administrative Concerns

Navigating the ever-changing landscape of public health and patient safety in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic is challenging and requires a multifaceted team approach. It is prudent for ATs to work with their district administration and local public health officials to address issues related to return-to-sport in secondary schools. As one of the few, or only, health care professionals on campus, ATs can play a critical role in developing policies and procedures that integrate available best practices and recommendations related to COVID-19. ATs should consider the following steps as they prepare for return-to-sport at their campus:

Establish a COVID-19 Response Team¹– (Section 12)

Assemble a COVID-19 response team in coordination with school/district health services. Members of this team could include the athletic trainer, supervising physician, athletic director, school nurse and public health official. The goal of this team is to identify and implement policies and procedures for a safe return-to-sport. The COVID-19 response team should work seamlessly with the athletic health care team, which should be already in place on campus. These teams could also be the same group of highly skilled individuals who function on both teams.

Review and Update School Communicable Disease Policy¹– (Section 12)

ATs should work with their COVID-19 response team or other appropriate parties to review, update and revise the school's communicable disease policy to address COVID-19. This could include:

- Collaboration with school nurses/clinic to discuss and develop policies related to COVID-19 reporting, screening and contact tracing requirements.
- Establishment of procedures to address a student or staff member who has tested positive for a communicable disease.
- Development of communication strategies and a communication plan for when information or updates are necessary for the athletic director, coaches, student athletes, parents or public health officials.
- Collaboration with the athletic director and coaches to identify ways in which training and conditioning, practices, competitions, receipt of athletic health care services and other items may need to change in response to COVID-19. Develop appropriate policies to address these concerns.
- Development of strategies and resources to promote wellness, safety and hygiene among staff and students.
 - Display standard daily precautions and promote healthy habits for student athletes and staff. Resources are available from the [CDC](#), [OSHA](#) or local health department.
 - Discourage shared personal equipment (e.g., clothing, towels, grooming tools, other personal effects).
 - Develop and provide infectious disease prevention education for coaches, parents and student athletes.

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Establish Pre-Participation Physical Examination Requirements ¹⁻ (Section 1), 4

The requirements, necessity and availability of pre-participation physical examinations for the 2020-21 school year has been discussed in detail from various entities involved in promoting health and safety conditions for student athletes. COVID-19 has caused a shift in the supply and demand of health care services, which may affect how pre-participation physical examinations are managed this year. There are various items to consider when determining the safest procedure for your school. ATs are encouraged to:

- Maintain compliance with all local and state ordinances, laws and regulations as they relate to the requirement and method of obtaining pre-participation physical examinations. Due to restrictions on mass gatherings, mass physical events should be canceled in most areas.
- In cooperation with your state activities association, consider allowing a one-year extension to 2019-20 pre-participation physical examination for eligible student athletes.
 - Review the [Statement on PPE and Athletic Participation](#) by the National Federation of High School Associations' Sports Medicine Advisory Committee (NFHS SMAC).
 - The goal of this strategy is to reduce strain on primary care physicians and clinics during this time.
 - If your state activity association accepts the extension of 2019-20 pre-participation physical examinations, it is recommended that the school:
 - Obtain updated medical history for all returning athletes. Schools should consider adding COVID-19 symptomology and exposure questions to their medical history forms.
 - Require all new athletes (i.e., first-time athletic participants in the school's athletic program) to obtain pre-participation physical examination.
 - Athletes with underlying, pre-existing conditions, injuries or illnesses must obtain an updated pre-participation physical examination or appropriate clearance from treating physician based upon situation.

Assess Supply and Equipment Needs in Response to COVID-19 ¹⁻ (Section 12)

As health care professionals, athletic trainers should have access to appropriate supplies and equipment to protect their patients and themselves. ATs are encouraged to:

- Take stock of current inventory of personal protective equipment and cleaning and sanitization supplies. Determine additional needs based on projected increase in use. Items to consider include:
 - Gloves
 - Masks. Schools may be asked or required to provide additional masks for:
 - Athletes (e.g., conditioning, practices, games, meetings, etc.)
 - Staff (e.g., conditioning, practices, games, meetings, etc.)
 - Game and event personnel
 - Officials

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- Cleaning and sanitization supplies. Work with school custodial services to assess and coordinate fulfillment.
- Assess the logistics of obtaining necessary supplies, equipment and related services in your area.
 - Determine any supply chain concerns and discuss with your supervising physician and athletic director.
 - Review your access to funding to obtain necessary supplies and equipment. Discuss deficit concerns with your athletic director or school board.
 - Review the current availability, process and timeline of reconditioning of equipment. Identify any novel steps to the process that may affect your school.

Physical Activity Concerns

As schools prepare for a return of sport in the fall, critical steps are necessary in advance of student athletes' return to campus in order to provide a safe environment for practice and competition. Considerations should be given to detraining, acclimatization and new precautions that may be needed as competition resumes. As ATs prepare for the return-to-sport on campus, they should consider:

Prepare Athletes for Return to Physical Activity¹ - (Section 5)(Section 7)

- Identify and prepare for detraining concerns in student athletes. Student athletes have been at home since mid-March, and although home workouts may have been provided, detraining needs to be considered and may include the following:
 - Allow for retraining period as opposed to engaging in sport-specific activities immediately.
 - Ensure adequate progression and training and preparation phase.
 - Ensure an appropriate progression of sport-specific activities once practices are initiated.

Heat Acclimatization Concerns¹ - (Section 5)(Section 7)

- Consider detraining effects on acclimatization.
- Anticipate changes in normal schedule, such as starting during summer months, that may affect heat acclimatization.
- Update or establish acclimatization procedures based on heat and equipment concerns.

Condensed or Expanded Preseason Considerations¹¹ - (Section 5)(Section 7)

In collaboration with your athletic director and coaches, plan and prepare for a progression structure related to:

- Length of preseason, duration of practices, number of overall practices, equipment worn and location.
- Addressing likelihood of increase in number of injuries after layoff.

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*Conditioning and Practice Sessions Concerns*¹ - (Section 5)(Section 7)

Establish necessary policies related to phased reopening of athletics as determined by your federal, state or local government and governing athletics/activities association. These phases may include the following:

- Requirement of pre-workout screenings (e.g., sign and symptom check, temperature check).
- Limitations on size of gatherings based on phase of reopening of athletics.
- Face coverings may be required for participation in conditioning, practices and games.
- Enhanced facilities cleaning requirements.
- Prepare for revised hydration strategies that may include:
 - No shared water bottles; athletes should bring own.
 - Follow state guidelines regarding use of watering stations based on phase as determined by federal, state or local government and governing athletics/activities association.

Risk Mitigation Strategies

As a health care provider on campus, ATs are integral in bridging communicable disease mitigation strategies into day-to-day practice. ATs can establish and implement related policies and educate staff and students on how to reduce the spread of germs. ATs should consider the following as part of their risk mitigation strategies in response to COVID-19:

*Prepare the Facilities*¹ - (Section 2)(Section 3)

- Reassess the Board of Certification (BOC) [Facility Principles](#) document.
- Enforce social distancing policies when applicable and as indicated.
- Ensure that showers are functional. During phase one and two, locker rooms and showers are closed. While showering reduces the risk of skin disorders, it also increases the amount of time athletes are in close proximity. Social distancing rules may encourage teams to have athletes shower at home and reduce close proximity activities in the locker room.
- Review and make necessary updates to cleaning and sanitization policies to help mitigate the spread of communicable diseases. Areas to consider include, but are not limited to:
 - Procedures for cleaning and sanitizing the athletic training facility.
 - Procedures for cleaning and sanitizing other public/shared facilities (e.g., locker rooms, weight rooms, etc.).
 - Procedures for cleaning and sanitizing hydration stations.
 - Procedures for cleaning and sanitizing laundry, towels, balls or other shared athletic equipment.

Illness Reporting^{1 - (9) (12)}

- Follow established school protocols on reporting communicable disease and illnesses.
Collaborate with school health services as outlined in your school communicable disease policy.

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- Encourage people who feel sick to stay home. Student athletes and school staff should not go to work or school if they feel ill. Request that they contact their medical provider and follow the advice provided.

*Promote Wellness and Hygiene*¹ (Section 7)

ATs should educate staff and students on general wellness and healthy hygiene practices. This could include the following:

- Wash hands with soap and water or use hand sanitizer, especially after touching frequently used items or surfaces.
- Avoid touching your face.
- Sneeze or cough into a tissue, or the inside of your elbow.
- Students should be encouraged and educated to shower prior to leaving facility as to not transport communicable disease (MSRA, impetigo, herpes, viruses, etc.). During phase one and two, locker rooms and showers are closed. While showering reduces the risk of skin disorders, it also increases the amount of time athletes are in close proximity. Social distancing rules may encourage teams to have athletes shower at home and reduce close proximity activities in the locker room.
- Disinfect frequently used items and surfaces as much as possible.
- Strongly consider using face coverings while in public and particularly when using mass transit.
- Vulnerable individuals, including coaches and administrators, should not participate in any practices, conditioning activities, contests or events during phases one and two..
- Masks should be worn, social distancing enforced and “hygiene basics” adhered to in all situations.
- Display standard daily precautions and promote healthy habits for student athletes and staff. Resources are available from the CDC, OSHA or local health department.
- Discourage shared personal equipment (e.g., clothing, towels, grooming tools, other personal effects).
- Develop and provide infectious disease prevention education for coaches, parents and student athletes.

*Review Emergency Action Plan*¹ – (Section 8)

- Ensure venue-specific EAPs are in place and up to date due to COVID-19 related effects on the cardiovascular, neurologic and other systems.
 - Include location of nearest automated external defibrillator (AED).
 - Practice and rehearse
 - Recommend all coaches are CPR and first aid certified

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