

USC Athletic Trainers Head to Basic Training

Soldiers at the U.S. Army's largest basic training facility – Fort Jackson, SC – are reaping the benefits of athletic training services, via to a two-year pilot program that began in August.

Six months after “Certified Athletic Trainer – Forward Program” launched, organizers and participants alike say results are promising.

“We have qualitative data that suggests everybody is very pleased so far,” explained Jim Mensch, PhD, ATC, principal investigator and author of the \$1.1 million grant awarded to the University of South Carolina for the Forward Program.

a year in the making

Forward Program was created when USC leaders brainstormed ways to collaborate with nearby Fort Jackson. Mensch's idea to offer athletic training services, thereby limiting attrition due to injury, caught the attention of Brig. Gen. James Schwitters.

With strong support from the Fort Jackson command, Mensch's grant was approved, and he began building the Forward Program team.

Six USC master's degree students and two interns were hand-picked to care for seven of the post's battalions. Two certified athletic trainers were hired as on-site coordinators, and a post-doctoral fellow came on board as well.

After lots of paperwork, clearance procedures and the expected startup challenges (think technical difficulties, supply discrepancies, etc.), Forward Program moved forward.

how it works

In Forward Program, athletic trainers cover their assigned battalions in the field, rather than remaining in a larger clinic where appointments are required.

“In our program, the certified athletic trainers are out with their battalions, watching them condition and train,” Mensch said. “They're authorized to provide care immediately.”

Although each battalion is different, the athletic training role generally includes:

— Pre-Performance Preparation

Like any athlete, Soldiers need taping and treatment to get ready for the day's activity – be it combat training or a march.



University of South Carolina graduate student Cammie Lepak cares for Soldiers at Fort Jackson, the Army's largest basic training post.

— Profile PT (as in Physical Training)

While their company continues with regularly scheduled training, injured Soldiers take part in rehabilitation and conditioning prepared by their athletic trainer. This can range from aquatic exercise to various rehab measures.

— Sick Call

Working with the battalion's medic, the athletic trainer evaluates, treats or refers however many recruits show up (battalions comprise 1,000-1,500 soldiers). Musculoskeletal conditions are seen by the AT, while the medic handles other complaints.

— Rehab

Time permitting, the athletic trainers work one-on-one with injured Soldiers and training personnel.

— Administration

This is the government, after all. Paperwork abounds, and the ATs are simultaneously participating in funded research.

All of this, of course, is melded with each AT's class schedule at USC. Most spend 25 hours per week on post.

finding their niche

Teri LaSalle, MSPT, ATC, CSCS, one of the two full-time coordinators, said it took communication, teamwork, time and trust for Forward Program to find its footing. The athletic trainers

“I have [basic training recruits] who are grandparents. They can be ages 17-42 to get into the military. It’s interesting, because they may have other factors that affect their injury. They may be very athletic or not active at all.”

— *Rebekah Blend*

servicing each battalion are considered special staff officers; while they don’t have a military rank, they are part of the command staff.

At first, that caused concern.

“We had a lot of educating to do to assure the cadre, all personnel working with Soldiers in training, that we are here to add to the health care already provided – not to take anyone’s job,” she said.

Rebekah Blend, ATC, said time was well-spent building rapport.

“I’ve been able to build some pretty good relationships,” she said. “As far as I can tell, the Soldiers like having me there. They like having someone to talk to who’s not their drill sergeant.”

Empathetic confidant is not exactly how Soldiers in her battalion view Camala Lepak, ATC, CSCS, NSCA-CPT. A member of the National Guard herself, Lepak quickly did away with the “sit-around-and-heal” philosophy that used to be the default at her battalion’s Profile PT.

“When I first briefed some of the drill sergeants, they thought I was going to turn them into babies,” Lepak said. “But now the battalion commander tells me no one wants to come to Profile PT because I make them sweat and work harder than regular PT.”

In Heather Brunette’s battalion, leaders led by example.

“Drill sergeants treat their Soldiers almost like their kids: they’re very protective, and if they don’t trust you they’re not going to send them to you,” said Brunette, ATC. “A couple of commanders had injuries that I treated, and then people started working with me more.”

So, is basic training really that much

different from pre-season two-a-days?

“Well, they warned us before we got here that some of these people had never done physical activity,” Brunette explained. “Yesterday I had a kid who can’t even hold himself up to do a push-up. I get a lot of people who are just sore and are not used to it.”

Clunky combat boots combined with intricate and speedy drills lead to lots of lower limb injuries. Just standing up so many hours per day creates problems, like femoral neck stress fracture.

“To see the change in the Soldiers from when they first get here to nine weeks later is pretty exciting and rewarding, and they are very appreciative,” Lepak said.

recognition and appreciation

Forward Program athletic trainers are all looking forward to this year. Startup challenges and “learning discoveries” (Army code for “here’s-what-we-can-improve-next-time”) are behind them.

The real work, they say, can begin.

“One of our learning discoveries has been supplies, and Troy [Burger, the other full-time AT coordinator] has worked very, very hard on getting us not only supplies, but the right ones,” LaSalle explained.

“We’ve had to ask our athletic trainers to be innovative up to this point. Our first shipment of supplies came from a general medical supply company used by the hospital at Fort Jackson, and some of the items were the same name but not the actual product.”

In a feat of diplomacy, Burger arranged to order athletic training supplies directly from an AT distributor, creating a new government contract.

“I think that shows how much they value our mission and want us to succeed,” LaSalle explained.

Awards are another stamp of approval.

Brunette received a Service Plaque from her battalion at her very first training class’s graduation. Blend has been awarded a General’s Coin and a Brigade Coin; Lepak, too, earned a Brigade Coin, considered a high honor.

“They’re happy to have us there and they feel like we’re making a difference for the soldiers,” LaSalle said.

“This program allows us to use our knowledge and skills to make our own kind of contribution.” **nn**

Forward Program

Jim Mensch, PhD, ATC

USC Clinical Associate Professor and Graduate Athletic Training Program Director

Tom Dompier, PhD, ATC

Post Doctoral Fellow

Teri LaSalle, MSPT, ATC, CSCS

USC Athletic Training Coordinator

Troy Burger, MS, ATC, CSCS,

USC Athletic Training Coordinator

Camala Lepak, ATC, CSCS

1st/34th Battalion (BN),

165th Brigade (BDE)

Research: Injury Occurrence

in Army Basic Training Recruits

Rebekah Blend, ATC

BN 1st/61st, BDE 165th

Research: Injuries in the Military

Heather Brunette, ATC

BN 3rd/60th, BDE 193rd

Research: Nutrition & Stress Fractures in

Basic Training (Army)

Rebecca Lowry, MS, ATC

BN 3rd/13th, BDE 193rd

LaKisha Snyder, ATC

BN 1st/13th, BDE 193rd

Research: Disordered Eating/Eating Disorders

in the Military

Stephanie Stoehr, ATC

187 AIT BN

Research: Left v. Right Side Lower Limb

Injuries in BCT Soldiers

Amelia Upright, ATC

120th Reception BN

Becky Rivard, ATC, NSCA-CPT

Float

Research: Diet and Stress Reaction in BCT

Numbers

Brigades at Fort Jackson: 3

Battalions in each brigade: 2-5

Companies in each battalion: 6

Soldiers in each company: 200-250
(plus 11 drill instructors)

Total number of soldiers in each 9-week basic training cycle: 4,500-7,000

Number of athletic trainers: 8 graduate assistants, plus 2 full-time coordinators