

# Success Not Prevented By Physical Challenges

*The profession of athletic training was created to help overcome disability in varying degrees. But what does this profession offer practitioners who themselves face physical challenges?*

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Special Contributor**

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), enacted July 26, 1990, prohibits discrimination in employment, public service, public accommodations and telecommunications.

In short, the ADA is a watchdog for those with disabilities.

Athletic training, in a way, serves the same role. The profession exists because the physically active become disabled to some degree.

What types of attitudinal, environmental and organizational handicaps have been imposed on certified athletic trainers with disabilities? How have some of these ATCs broken down the barriers and carved a niche for themselves? Who can serve as resources or mentors for program directors who have athletic training students with disabilities?

## **A Man and His Dog**

Tom Weidner, PhD, ATC, is the educational

program director at Ball State University. His seeing-eye dog accompanies him everywhere.

"I'm probably infamous and don't even know it," he said. "People who I don't know, know me because I'm the guy with the dog."

Weidner's visual impairment was gradual. In college, tunnel vision precluded his driving, but otherwise, he went about the business of doing what he loved to do. It just took higher levels of concentration.

"I was very conscious of where I might need to go and how to get there," he said. "I was more alert than most, as a result."

Sidelines – where activity is constant and sometimes frantic – brought on more stress and a greater sense of vulnerability, but Weidner persisted.

In 1981, he earned his NATABOC certification.

"I must have been one of the first candidates with a visual impairment to be examined," he said, recalling that his examiners were unfazed. "They were very matter-of-fact about my clumsiness and awk-

wardness. I told them I would need some assistance in locating some things."

It took a bit of adjustment. Weidner recounts the following exchange with a chuckle: "Where's the tape?" "It's in the drawer." "OK, now where's the drawer?"

Working with basketball and baseball was challenging, especially with night travel, he said. But the teams were supportive.

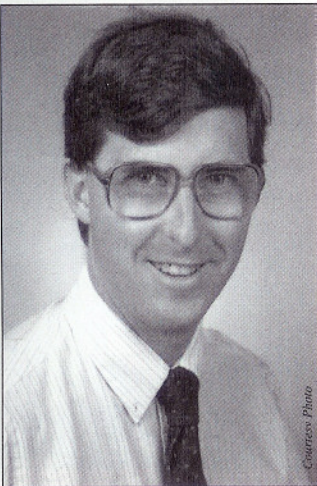
His first position after completing his doctorate was as a program director at California State University, Northridge, a job he snagged during a telephone interview.

Leaving California, some years later, for a new job in the Midwest was "no picnic," Weidner said.

By that time, his vision had further deteriorated, and Weidner became ever more attuned to potential employers' reactions to his condition.

"I got to the point that I developed different strategies on how to tell them, when to tell them, how I could buffer this so they

**Although Tom Weidner, PhD, ATC, lost his vision to retinitis pigmentosa, he has not been discouraged from leading a productive career in athletic training and serving as an inspiration to others.**



*Courtesy Photo*

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didn't lose perspective," he said. "From the moment I stepped off the plane, everything that had brought me to the short-list and to the interview went out the window.

"People didn't appreciate what could be done," he added. "The biggest challenge was to overcome people trying to see themselves with a visual impairment but without the skills and techniques I had developed. They came to the conclusion that they were not capable, therefore I wasn't."

Weidner uses a computer with a voice synthesizer to perform most of his administrative work. A doctoral assistant helps with some aspects of clinic teaching, site visits and research.

"We interact, share thoughts and observations," he said. "It works out."

During clinical instruction, Weidner demonstrates and makes corrections by utilizing verbal cues and subtle nuances. He is the model when he evaluates skills for completion.

"I can tell if they are on the MCL or if they apply enough pressure performing the stress test," he said. "My technique is harder for the student, and I am able to turn a disadvantage into an advantage."

Now, Weidner is an accomplished author, researcher and speaker, and he is highly regarded at Ball State. None of it came without work, though.

"I earned the support over a productive career; it didn't just happen," he said. "But it has enabled me to continue to have a productive career."

### ATC with MS

Rose Snyder, MS, ATC, has been a certified athletic trainer for 25 years. She has had multiple sclerosis (MS) for 18 of those years.

For many years following her initial diagnosis, only close friends and family were privy to Snyder's condition. About nine years ago, however, she needed to use ambulatory aids as her

lower extremity strength deteriorated.

Her progress on canes is slow and tiring, and Snyder prefers using a scooter. Over the past nine years, her fine eye-hand coordination has also deteriorated.

But she describes herself as fiercely independent and says quitting the profession has never crossed her mind.

Snyder has worked at the same hospital-based clinic for 21 years, being responsible for all home programs, orthotics, casting, supervision or rehabilitation in the gym and technical support for all computers in the five-division department.

She teaches exercise physiology at a local university and volunteers at a local high school that does not have an ATC.

"I do it because I love football and the coaches are longtime friends," she said. "I would not be able to accept the responsibility of a paid position in this setting. I do what I can, but I recognize the limitations.

"I cannot cover outdoor sports [under muddy conditions] without an all-terrain vehicle," Snyder explained. "In my case, I cannot tolerate heat and humidity any longer." When she covers the high school games, athletes needing attention are transported to the track circling the field, where the surface is easier for Snyder to navigate.

"If I needed to get out there and perform CPR, I would," she said. "I am capable. Primarily, though, I do triage and function quite nicely."

In the clinic, Snyder tapes infrequently and uses modified techniques and a bit more time to overcome her decreased manual dexterity.

"When I work with patients, I am primarily ruling out surgical pathology, and I don't do every clinical test," she said. "I position myself to accurately perform the test.

"I also have a high-low electric table that allows me to position the

patient comfortably for me.

"I perform some orthopedic tests with modifications, but then, I have looked at thousands of knees when I was able to do it [the standard way]. I know what I am looking for. It wouldn't be the same for a new student or a new grad."

From Snyder's perspective, the biggest challenge to an ATC with MS is insensitive people. She said some are taken aback at the impression she makes using the scooter as fast as some people are walking.

"The initial impression is quickly dispelled, and after that it is the reverse," she said. "In some cases it is motivational for them to see me coming in early to work out and getting my job done.

"They say, 'My problem is not so bad; she's coming to work and to work out.'"

An elderly woman told Snyder recently that she admired her.

"They think it's a big deal [to function with MS]," she said. "To me, it is not a big deal.

"I have to work. Having chronic illness doesn't lend itself to job mobility. I don't know from day to day what I will be able to do."

### Paraplegia is Not Paralysis

Bill Irr, MD, now a neurologist, is a former student athletic trainer at West Virginia University and earned his ATC credentials in the 1980s. He has had paraplegia since birth and uses crutches.

Irr met the head coach of the Buffalo Braves baseball team, who took the young student under his wing and encouraged him to enter the profession.

"It was as close to the game as I could get without getting into the game," Irr explained. "To provide service and care to competitors was so rewarding. It was an honor to be part of that system."

Irr's early mentor approached his high school administrator's on his behalf.

"He got them to send me to a Cramer workshop. Then I met Ed Abramoski of the Buffalo Bills," Irr said. "He encouraged me, and all I wanted to do was to go to the school where he went."

In an interview at that college, Irr felt demoralized because the staff pointed out he would not be able to lift a 250-pound football player.

"Luckily, before I gave up, I went to see West Virginia," Irr said. "They embraced me 100 percent. Because I had experience from high school, some of my skills were better than the students in the program."

Irr maintained a 4.0 average and completed all clinical rotations, including football. The surgical rotation of his athletic training preparation sparked an interest in medicine.

Even though he is a successful physician now, Irr still finds "the look" annoying.

"Some patients I have an immedi-

ate connection with, and they don't see the crutches," Irr said. "But more often than not, you get it. And it is not because you are fat, have a big head or are ugly.

"If you are a non-disabled person, you wouldn't see it."

### Restrictions Can be Overcome

As an undergraduate internship student in the mid-1990s, Matt Luthi, MS, ATC, was allowed to tape only during "down" times and was not given the opportunity to travel with athletic teams.

Now, he is a fully credentialed clinician with cerebral palsy who was certified in 1998.

"There are eight levels of cerebral palsy, one being the most severe," Luthi explained. "I am an individual with right hemiplegia, level seven."

Luthi has restricted motion on his right side, limited mobility in his right hand and a noticeable limp.

His initial athletic training experience was very positive. As a student athletic trainer at Barton County

Community College in Kansas, Luthi earned an associate's degree.

"I wanted to be an athletic trainer from day one, and my experience there [at Barton] was great," he said. "The head athletic trainer really cared about the educational process. He didn't stereotype me, and he gave me opportunities to prove myself."

When Luthi transferred to a four-year university, his experiences changed, but he didn't question his limited role in the program.

"The head athletic trainer at the four-year university did not have the time to provide personal attention to each student athletic trainer," he said. "Philosophically, the university athletic training program seemed to be more student worker-oriented than education directed.

"I often had a hard time learning the skills required of a student athletic trainer in the university setting," Luthi added. "The situation I was in often made me feel that I was slow, wouldn't get any better and that my employment opportunities would

### Matt Luthi, MS, ATC, has not let cerebral palsy interfere with a successful career in athletic training.



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be limited.”

However, Luthi earned his undergraduate degree and continued in the university's master's degree program. About that time, a new educational program director was hired.

“She was great, and she spent time talking to me and helping me to modify some of the techniques I would need,” Luthi said.

After passing the NATABOC oral practical exam and graduating with his master's degree, Luthi spent one year as the head athletic trainer at Highland Community College before joining the athletic training staff at Barton County Community College.

“It's like being home,” he said. “I work with athletes who are aware of my disability but who accept me for who I am and what I have accomplished.

“Give everyone an opportunity,” he added. “Education is the key to success, and everyone has something to contribute. For myself, I don't set limits. When you set limits, you limit yourself.”

### Listening in Many Ways

Tevis Thompson, a former ATC, is an interpreter for the hearing impaired and owns Deafinitely Accessible.

“Accommodating a person with a hearing impairment is the easiest disability to address because there are no architectural barriers,” he said, emphasizing that the ADA requires interpreters for hearing impaired athletes and students.

“Some institutions think they can get away with writing notes, but you have to realize that English is not the first language for many people with a hearing impairment,” he said. “Translations are not literal. There are different signs for a runny nose, a run in my stocking and run to the store. Medical terminology is even more difficult.”



**Sandy Hart, ATC, provides athletic training coverage for a high school, coaches three youth teams and is a certified sports massage therapist. She's also the ATC for the World Games for the Deaf and says Deaf athletes feel a kinship with her because she, too, is Deaf.**

Sandy Hart, ATC, is Deaf. Her exuberant personality supersedes silence, however.

The California State University, Northridge graduate – whose program director was Weidner – is encouraging and persistent.

“Just keep fighting,” she advises. “Don't give up.”

As a student, Hart had interpreters and note-takers in the classroom. Group learning situations made it difficult to process information, however, so she spent much time one-on-one with her instructors, which she advises for other Deaf students.

In 1987, when Hart earned her credentials, she required only a simple modification in the exam: she needed to be in a position to read the examiner's lips. After gaining her certification, she was hired at Pasadena Polytechnical High School, where she is currently in her 14th year.

“I don't think I had any problems in the hiring process,” Hart said. “They hadn't had an athletic trainer for three years, and here I was.”

Hart communicates with her athletes and parents without the aid of interpreters. She has yet to request a telecommunication device. Her athletics director and coaches communicate her instructions to parents via telephone, when necessary.

“They are very fond of her over there,” Hart's husband reports. “The students and parents raised more than \$10,000 when they found out she needed to go to Arizona for cancer treatment.”

Seven years ago, Hart underwent two bone marrow transplants that sent the multiple myeloma she suffers into remission. She missed no work except during her out-of-town treatment.

In addition to athletic training duties, Hart is a certified sports massage therapist and coaches three youth teams. In addition, she was selected as an ATC for the 1997 World Games for the Deaf in Copenhagen. She also will accompany teams to the 2001 World Games in Rome.

“I am the first Deaf [certified] athletic trainer selected for the Games,” she said. “A lot of athletes seem to gravitate to me because I am Deaf.”

Hart has advice for Deaf athletic training students.

“Be strong,” she said. “Be confident. Be positive. Have lots of one-on-one conversations. Fight hard for what you need. Don't be afraid to tell athletes you are Deaf and they need to work with you.”

To non-hearing impaired classmates, Hart says, “Make an extra effort to mingle with Deaf students. It's easy for us to feel isolated and left out.” ■

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