

When the job's a game:
**Athletes, coaches,
sports officials,
and related workers**

by Henry Kasper

We are a Nation of sports fans—and sports players. Some of those who play a sport may even fantasize about becoming professional athletes—a dream that comes true for very few. Others are satisfied with the opportunity to be part of the play and still earn some pay in jobs as coaches, sports officials, and related workers.

This article provides a game plan for a career as a sports professional. It tackles the occupations of athlete; coach and instructor; sports official, including referee and umpire; and related workers (athletic trainer and scout), all of whom are paid to play a part in the widening world of sports. The occupations are described by the nature of their work, working conditions, employment and outlook, earnings, and qualifications and training requirements.

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Sports work

As the following occupations illustrate, there's more than one way to share in the excitement of a sports career—and the grueling effort that comes with it. Whether they're making the plays, calling the game, or working the sidelines, these professionals are part of the action.

Athletes. Professional athletes are paid to compete in organized, officiated sports events to entertain spectators. These include both

Employment in a professional sports career can be exciting—but often grueling—work.

team sports, such as basketball and soccer, and individual sports, such as golf and tennis.

Athletes must conform to each sport's established rules. In addition to playing the game, they spend many hours under the guidance of a coach or sports instructor practicing skills and teamwork and training to achieve and maintain peak physical condition. To succeed, professional athletes need to understand the rules and strategies of their sport, be in exceptional physical condition, use excellent form and technique, and compete fairly.

Coaches. Coaches organize, teach, and direct amateur and professional athletes in team sports. In individual sports, this role is filled by sports instructors. The duties of coaches and sports instructors are similar in many ways and different in others.

Both coaches and sports instructors train athletes for competition by holding practice sessions to perform drills; improve skills, techniques, and conditioning; and correct weaknesses. Using their expertise in the sport, coaches and sports instructors advise players about proper form and technique to help athletes play to their potential. They evaluate the athletes and their opponents to devise a competitive strategy. Motivating athletes to play hard challenges most coaches and sports instructors but is vital for success.

In some ways, coaches and sports instructors differ in their approach to athletes because of the focus of their work. For example, during a game, coaches manage the team to optimize its chance of victory, substituting players and ordering the team to execute strategic plays. In contrast, sports instructors—such as those who work with professional tennis players—often are not permitted to instruct their athletes during competition. But working one on one with athletes allows instructors to design a customized training program for each individual they train.

Many sports instructors work with children or young adults, helping them to learn physical and social skills while improving their physical condition.

Sports officials. Referees, umpires, and other sports officials police both professional and amateur sports. These workers detect infractions of rules and impose penalties established in the sport's regulations. Referees, umpires, and other sports officials anticipate play and position themselves to see the action, assess the situation, and make split-second calls. Some sports officials, such as boxing referees, work independently; others, such as basketball referees, work in groups of two or more. Combining the roles of police officer, judge, and diplomat, sports officials promote fair, safe play and encourage sportsmanship.

Related workers. Other workers who have jobs related to sports include athletic trainers and scouts. Recreation worker and fitness worker, two other sports-centered jobs, are classified as personal care and service occupations and are not discussed in this article.

Athletic trainers specialize in the prevention, treatment, and



Sports instructors work one on one with athletes to help them improve their skills.

rehabilitation of athletes' injuries. Long known for performing tasks such as administering first aid and providing physical therapy, athletic trainers now also help athletes avoid injury through conditioning. Trainers design and monitor strength, cardiovascular, and flexibility training programs for athletes. An athletic trainer's duties include implementing an injury prevention program, initiating immediate treatment of injuries, and providing rehabilitation therapy to injured athletes under the direction of the team physician. Athletic trainers also select equipment, maintain athletic training areas, stock supplies, and keep records.

Scouts are sports intelligence agents for teams—they evaluate the skills of both amateur and professional athletes to determine their talent and potential. Scouts seek out top athletic candidates for the team they represent, and they do it stealthily: they try not to tip off their opponents to their interest when locating new talent. Ultimately, a scout's success will contribute to team success. At the college level, the head scout is usually an assistant coach, although some freelance scouts aid colleges by providing reports about players' abilities to coaches and publications. These scouts identify talented high school athletes by reading magazines and newspapers, contacting high school coaches, getting tips from alumni, and attending high school games or studying videotapes to observe prospects play. At the

Sports workers stay active during the off season as well as during the playing season.

professional level, scouting is more extensive; some professional sports teams hire scouting organizations, while other teams hire freelance scouts. A professional baseball team, for example, might have 18 full-time, 15 part-time, and 300 recommending scouts, most of whom work independently.

The sports life

Careers in professional sports are anything but the typical 9-to-5 job. Sports workers might have an office, but they also spend time in varying environments that range from gymnasiums to golf courses. Except for some sports, such as basketball, that hold competitions indoors throughout the winter, sports that are played outdoors predominate.

Most team sports have 4- to 7-month seasons during which all games are played and athletes practice nearly every day, with coaches and athletic trainers leading and assisting. That

means irregular work hours are common—athletes, coaches, sports officials, and related workers often work part-time, evenings, and weekends—and additional hours during the sports season are the rule. Athletes in individual sports often endure the same irregular working conditions; however, their sports seasons often run year round.

Even during the off season, sports workers stay busy. Athletes are encouraged to continue working out, with guidance from athletic trainers, to keep their bodies conditioned and to prevent future injury. Coaches meet regularly with assistant coaches, recruit players, and offer press releases for newspapers. Sports officials often continue to sharpen their skills by presiding over nonprofessional events or attending clinics and camps. Scouts also work during the off season, reading sports publications and reviewing films and videotapes of prospective professional athletes.



Athletes must be in peak physical condition to compete professionally.

Job stress is common in professional sports. Performances of athletes, coaches, sports officials, and related workers are analyzed by fans, the media, and, in team sports, franchise owners. Especially for athletes and coaches, this scrutiny often

Faster than average employment growth is expected for sports occupations from 1998 to 2008, but job competition will remain keen.

shifts the focus from quality of play to quantity of wins and losses. Losing the game could mean losing your job: in professional coaching, for example, job security is precarious—and when a head coach is fired, assistant coaches often lose their jobs as well.

Most people involved in professional sports travel a great deal. Professional athletes, coaches, and athletic trainers in team sports travel away from home for half their games each season; those involved in individual sports may travel to different cities nearly every week year round. Sports officials travel as well, but more so at the professional level because officials in the amateurs usually reside in the same cities and towns where they officiate. Scouts also travel most of the time, continually assessing prospective high school, college, and professional athletes.

How many jobs?

Although few make the big leagues, don't discount the minors. Athletes, coaches, sports officials, and related workers held nearly 52,000 jobs in 1998. Among the 70 percent employed in wage and salary jobs, almost one-fourth, 24 percent, worked in the commercial sports industry. Another 14 percent held jobs in miscellaneous amusement and recreation services, which includes golf and tennis clubs, swim clubs, health clubs and gymnasiums, riding stables, judo and karate schools, and other recreation related activities.

More detailed information for coaches and sports instructors shows that 13 percent were employed by State and local governments, excluding education and hospitals, to work in public recreation facilities and programs. Another 6 percent worked for civic, social, and fraternal associations, many of which have recreation facilities or sponsor amateur athletic teams. Barely 1 percent of coaches were counted in public and private education

because most coaches in elementary and secondary schools are employed as teachers.

Employment of professional athletes, coaches, sports officials, and related workers is expected to increase nearly 28 percent over the 1998-2008 decade, faster than the average for all occupations. With the current interest in sports showing no signs of slowing, the number of professional sports teams, leagues, and athletes will continue to increase. And as the number of athletes grows, so will the number of coaches and instructors, sports officials, and athletic trainers and scouts. Employment growth in professional athletics is echoed by the increasing numbers of paid coaching, sports officiating, and

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athletic training jobs in amateur athletics. Additional job opportunities will be generated by the need to replace workers who leave their jobs in professional athletics.

Despite job growth, competition for athletes and for most coaching and instructing jobs will continue to be intense. Competition for sports officials, athletic trainers, and scouts will remain intense as well, as the numbers of those positions are limited. Job prospects should be best for those with a bachelor's degree and experience—including previous success—within a sport.

Opportunities should be more favorable at the amateur level. Many prospective athletes begin sports at the lower levels: recreation leagues, community programs, or at the schools they attend—and these athletes need coaches, sports officials, and trainers. Outside of collegiate athletics, many coaching and sports officiating jobs working with youth and amateur athletes require fewer qualifications and provide experience for advancement to higher level jobs. Prospects for athletic trainers at the amateur level are also good as injury prevention increasingly is emphasized.

Big bucks, little bucks

Some people are drawn to sports by dreams of astronomical salaries. But the reality is that financial rewards in sports are hard to predict. Earnings of athletes, coaches, sports officials, and related workers range from a small, per-game fee to millions of dollars a season. However, the median annual earnings of these workers were \$22,200 in 1998, with the middle 50 percent earning between \$13,900 and \$38,800. The lowest paid 10 percent earned less than \$11,900; the highest paid 10 percent earned more than \$124,000.

For professional athletes, six-figure salaries are the rule, not the exception. In major team sports, star players command millions of dollars per season, often with guaranteed salaries and performance bonuses. Many individual athletes in sports like tennis and golf earn similarly lofty salaries. In those professional sports, however, individuals are usually rewarded with prize money for the number of contests won.

While some coaches and sports instructors receive a salary, others may be paid by the hour, per session, or based on the number of participants. Most school and amateur coaching and instructor jobs are part-time positions providing supplemental income to a coach's primary job. Earnings at the amateur level vary with the type of sport and the emphasis a community places on it. For example, coaches of major high school sports, such as basketball, receive about \$3,000 a season, while coaches for minor sports, such as tennis, earn about half that

amount unless there is strong local interest. College coaching has greater prestige and rewards. Unlike high school coaching, college coaching is usually a primary job. Most coaches in professional sports earn six-figure salaries.

Sports instructors earn considerably less. In 1998, for example, median hourly earnings of sports and physical training instructors were about \$11 per hour. The middle 50 percent earned between \$7 and \$16 per hour; the lowest 10 percent earned less than \$6 hourly, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$23 an hour.

Referee, umpire, and other sports official jobs in high schools and colleges are usually part time. Salaries vary, but many officials earn \$80 per game for major high school sports and \$100 per game at the college level, with major conferences paying significantly more. Sports officials typically command more money for tournaments and championship games. At the professional level, salaries for sports officials vary, depending on an official's experience and the league and sport he or she



...while those in individual sports may travel year round.

presides over. For example, baseball umpire salaries range from \$87,000 to \$260,000 per year in the major leagues, or roughly \$540 to \$1,600 per game for a 162-game season. In contrast, referees in the Women's National Basketball Association earn about \$500 per game for a 32-game season—a maximum of \$16,000 annually.

Salaries for athletic trainers vary. Athletic trainers in high schools usually teach courses part time, for which they receive

Athletes, coaches, sports officials, and related workers usually have years of experience before joining the pros.

compensation that totals about \$40,000 annually. College trainers usually work in sports full time but have salaries similar to those of their high school counterparts. Professional trainers' salaries depend on the team; some work part time only when the sport is in season, while others work year round and receive higher salaries.

Careers as scouts can be lucrative—particularly in professional athletics, where compensation is often based on the performance of the scouted athlete. In amateur athletics, scouts are usually assistant coaches and receive a fixed annual salary.

What it takes to make it

Athletes who seek to compete professionally must have extraordinary talent and knowledge of their sport, desire, and dedication to training. Some would-be professionals play in amateur tournaments and on high school and college teams, where the best attract the attention of professional scouts. Most schools require that athletes participating in high school and college sports maintain specific academic standards to be eligible to play.

Regardless of the sport chosen, becoming a professional athlete is the culmination of years of effort. In considering a future as a professional athlete, however, sports enthusiasts need a backup plan—because the odds are that they will need one. Even if they make it in the pros, the careers of most athletes are relatively short because of injury, age, and relentless competition from other athletes.

For coaches and sports instructors, education and training requirements vary by type of employer, sport, and level of responsibility. Regardless of the sport, knowledge of the game is a must. Some entry-level positions require experience as a

participant in the sport while others require substantial education or relevant experience.

Many coaches begin their careers as assistant coaches to gain knowledge and experience before becoming a head coach. Successful experience as a head coach can be a springboard to coaching at a higher level. Elementary and high schools usually first look to teachers and faculty to fill coaching positions. All States require teachers in public schools to have a bachelor's degree and state licensure. Degree programs specifically related to coaching include exercise and sports science, physiology, kinesiology, nutrition and fitness, physical education, and sports medicine. To reach the ranks of professional coaching, particularly in high profile sports, it usually takes years of coaching experience and a winning record in the lower ranks.

Many sports instructors start out as players in the sport they teach. Some have formal education and training. For most sports, certification makes it easier to find an instructor job. Tennis instructor jobs, for example, are usually filled by people who develop an avid interest in the activity while taking tennis classes and who then become certified. There are many certifying organizations, each specific to a sport, and their training requirements vary. A common requirement is that instructors be at least 18 years old; another is that the instructor be certified in CPR.

Referees, umpires, and other sports officials also need skills tailored to the sport over which they preside. Good fitness is essential for officials in sports that require extensive and quick movement throughout the field of play. Officials must have a thorough knowledge of the rules of the sport, be even-tempered, and be forceful enough to tactfully handle vehement challenges to their calls.

Officials may begin gaining experience by volunteering to oversee intramural, community, and recreational league competitions. For high school and college refereeing, candidates must be certified by an officiating school and get through a probationary period for evaluation. Some referees move to the collegiate level, for which an associate or bachelor's degree is preferred along with references, skills tests, and additional certification.

Each sport has its own requirements. Among the requirements for professional baseball umpires, for example, are a high school diploma or equivalent, 20/20 vision, and quick reflexes. Individuals attend 1 of 2 5-week professional umpire training schools, after which the top graduates participate in a skills evaluation course sponsored by the Professional Baseball Umpire Corporation. Umpires usually need 8 to 10 years of experience in the minor leagues before they are considered for major league jobs.

Other officials' participation in a clinic, camp, or school usually is required for certification. At the college level, some larger college conferences require officials to have certification and other qualifications, such as residence in or near the conference boundaries and experience that typically includes several years at high school, community college, and compatible conference levels.

Athletic trainers must complete college-level courses in anatomy, physiology, psychology, biomechanics, and first aid. They also are required to have a significant number of hours of practical work and certification through the National Athletic Trainers Association or apprenticeship or physical therapy programs.

Sports officials have different training requirements, depending on the sport.

Preparation for a career as a professional scout requires a knack for recognizing and gauging an athlete's ability. Most scouts are former players or coaches.

Find out more

To learn more about employment, training and education requirements, and job prospects for about 250 occupations, including sports and physical training instructors and coaches, refer to the *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2000-01 Edition*. The *Handbook* is usually available in school career counseling offices and public libraries. Most library collections also include books, periodicals, and other resources on careers in sports.

To get a better idea of what coaching and sports instructor jobs are like, talk to coaches and instructors at the elementary, secondary, and high school levels. You also might consider volunteering to work with amateur athletes or athletic teams to gain hands-on insight into the job duties, time commitment, and activities involved. Contact the following organizations to learn more about the occupations you are interested in.

For information about athletics at the collegiate level, contact:
National Collegiate Athletic Association
700 W. Washington St.
PO Box 6222
Indianapolis, IN 46206-6222
(317) 917-6222
<http://www.ncaa.org>

For information about high school coaching, contact:
National High School Athletic Coaches Association
PO Box 4342
Hamden, CT 06514
<http://www.hscoaches.org>

For information about sports officiating, contact:
National Association of Sports Officials
2017 Lathrop Ave.
Racine, WI 53405
(262) 632-5448
<http://www.naso.org>

For information about athletic trainer qualifications, certification requirements, and accredited programs, contact:
National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA)
2952 Stemmons Freeway, Suite 200
Dallas, TX 75247
(214) 637-6282
<http://www.cewl.com>

