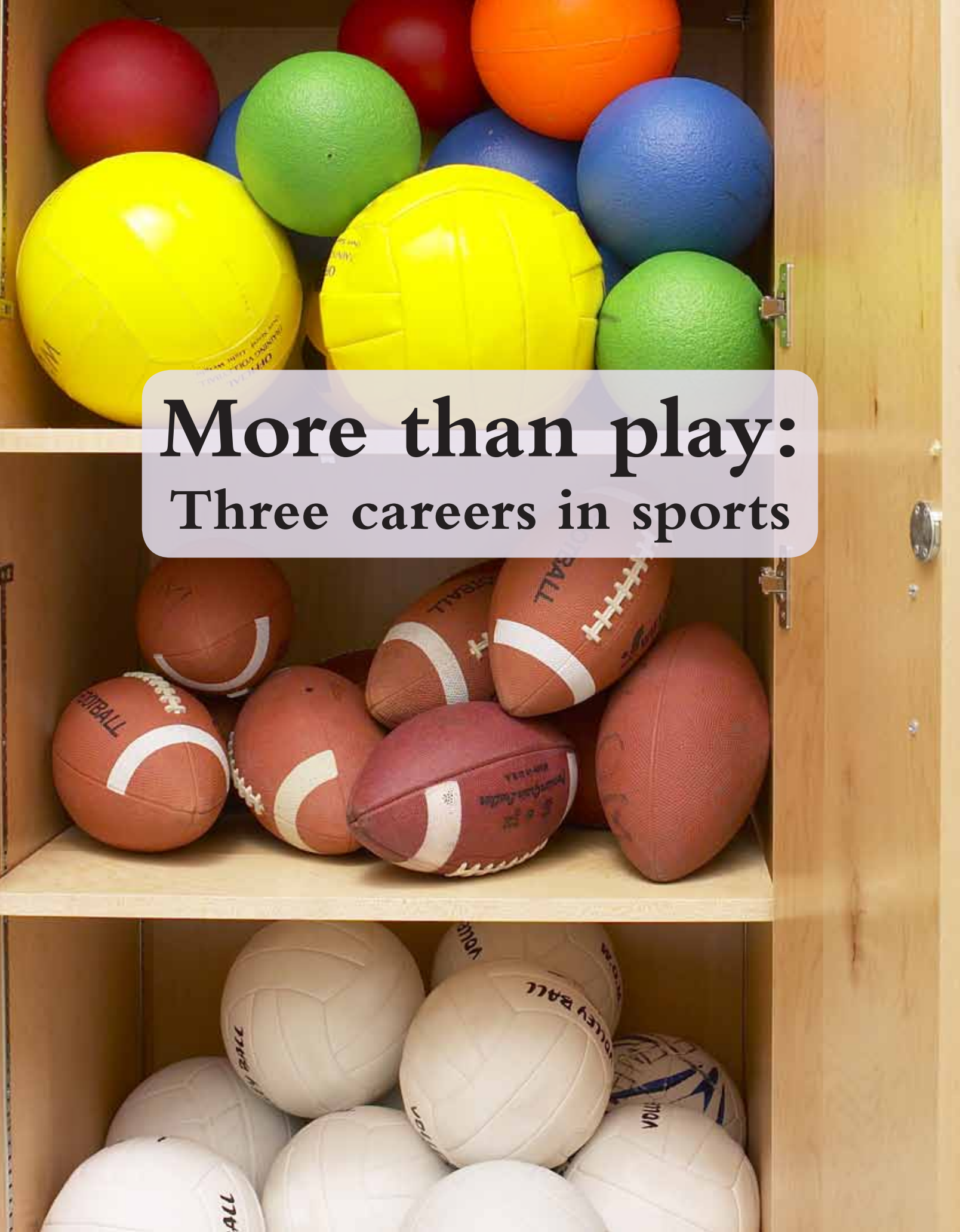


More than play:
Three careers in sports

Sports are more than fun and games; they also provide work for many people. Sports workers earn wages in leagues across the nation.

At the professional level, some of these workers earn lucrative salaries and contracts worth millions of dollars. But most sports workers make considerably less. Whether they make a lot or a little, these workers often do their jobs for the love of sport, not for the paycheck.

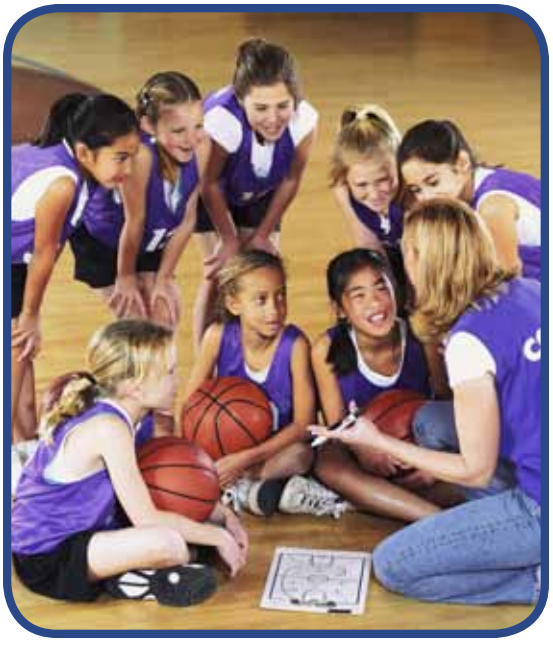
Organized sports include a variety of individual and team events, which require the efforts of many workers in different occupations. For example, managers and administrative staff run the business side of sports, such as marketing and human resources. Groundskeepers and janitors maintain the playing fields and facilities. And food vendors and cooks feed the many spectators.

Many people are particularly attracted to the sports occupations that are closest to the action. This article highlights three such occupations: coaches, athletic trainers, and sports officials. The first section provides an overview of each occupation, including what workers do, how much they earn, and what qualifications they need for an entry-level job. The second section explains how to prepare for these jobs—and what to expect if you get one. Sources for more information are listed at the end of the article.

Careers in sports

Sports workers often enter these careers because they have an interest in a particular sport. They may learn a sport at a young age and compete in recreational, amateur, or school leagues. Many continue participating into adulthood, either as amateurs or professionals. (See the box on page 7.) But some sports workers are enthusiasts who might not have actually played a sport.

Jobs for professional athletes are limited, and many people choose to put their sports knowledge to work in different ways. Some, such as coaches and athletic trainers, work closely with athletes; others, including sports officials, work with participants less directly.



Coaches

A coach helps athletes to develop the physical, technical, and strategic skills they need to play a sport. Coaches run practice and training sessions, develop strategies, analyze athletes' performances, and guide and encourage athletes. "Coaches put athletes in an environment to be successful both on and off the court," says Anne Kordes, head volleyball coach of a college team in Louisville, Kentucky.

Some athletes and teams employ multiple coaches, including head, assistant, and strength and conditioning coaches. Head coaches oversee assistant coaches, plan strategy and drills, and guide players throughout the event. Assistant coaches specialize in specific parts of the game, such as offense or passing in a football game. Strength and conditioning coaches work with athletes to keep them at peak physical condition. This work might include spending time at the gym lifting weights or doing cardiovascular and stretching exercises.

Coaches work together to make the most of a team's or player's potential. Kordes, for example, reviews game video and then meets with assistants to prepare for matches. "We

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Coaches teach the strategies of a sport to prepare athletes for competition.

come up with a strategy to neutralize the opponents' strengths and maximize our own," she says. "My assistants then work with the players to implement the strategy."

Coaches use their knowledge of a sport to develop a training program, often adapting their strategies to fit different athletes' learning styles. For example, some athletes might learn better by doing, while others learn best by watching video. "I need to first figure out the best way to teach athletes the skills they need to get better," says Kordes, "so that I'm in a better position to help and motivate them."

Practices give coaches time to teach techniques and skills they want athletes to master. Teaching skills progressively, coaches start with basic drills that gradually become more difficult and lead to mastery of the skill. "We practice a lot of drills to improve technique and conditioning," says Eric Gehrke, head coach of a high school rowing program in Alexandria, Virginia.

Coaches follow established safety procedures to protect the athletes. For example, Gehrke administers a swim test for every prospective team member. He also packs life jackets and checks weather conditions before allowing athletes to go out on the water.

To help keep athletes healthy, coaches also coordinate with athletic trainers and strength and conditioning coaches. Together, the coaches and athletic trainers monitor the physical health of the athletes and modify training exercises and practice drills to accommodate those who have problems. "We want our athletes to play hard on both defense and offense," says Kordes. "But we need to be aware of their physical limitations to avoid injuring them."

Dealing with athletes, the athletes' parents, and fans can often be a source of frustration for coaches. For example, a parent might push coaches to give more playing time to his or her child or voice unhappiness with a team's performance. "You must be patient," says Gehrke, "because sometimes you have to deal with the parents almost as much as the kids."

But for coaches, working with the athletes is often the most rewarding part of the job. "It's not all about trophies and honors," Kordes says. "What makes me proud is mentoring and caring for my kids."

Employment and wages. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) collects data on coaches and scouts together. In May 2011, there were 193,810 wage and salary coaches and scouts, according to BLS. They earned a median annual wage of $28,470. The lowest earning 10 percent made $17,110 or less, and the highest earning 10 percent made $65,060 or more.

Most coaches work in schools, including elementary, secondary, and postsecondary. Coaches at the elementary, middle, and high

school levels usually work part time and may coach more than one sport. Some coaches work as teachers, which may require teaching certification. Coaches at the college and professional levels usually work full time as a coach in one sport.

Qualifications. As a group, coaches generally do not need formal education to enter the occupation. But they may need certification, depending on the sport and the state in which they seek employment.

Experience as an athlete may be enough for coaches seeking employment in elementary, middle, and high schools. It's still no guarantee of employment, however. "The better your athletic credentials, the easier it is to find a high school coaching job," says Gehrke. Coaches at the college and professional levels usually need at least a bachelor's degree as well as experience in the sport.

Experience as an athlete also gives coaches extensive knowledge of the sport in which they coach. This experience helps them develop strategies and drills with which to train and develop the athletes. Coaches also learn through observing how others coach. "The more you learn from what other coaches do," says Gehrke, "the better you'll be."

Coaches need interpersonal, decision-making, and leadership skills to teach their athletes and help them improve. And head coaches also need management and communication skills to lead their staff. "You manage a lot of people, from your assistants to your athletes," says Kordes. "If you want to be successful, you have to communicate clearly to get everyone pulling together in the same direction."

Athletic trainers

Athletic trainers keep athletes healthy before, during, and after competition. "We are always on the lookout for potential injuries," says Charlie Thompson, head of athletic training at a university in Princeton, New Jersey. "We want to deal with problems right away."

Athletic trainers are available during athletes' training, practices, and play. Their priority is to prevent injuries. To accomplish this, they examine athletes, collect medical histories, and check for preexisting conditions. If an athlete is predisposed to certain injuries, the athletic trainer can try to limit the problem by taking precautions. For a sprinter with tight hamstrings, for example, an athletic trainer might suggest special exercises and stretches to help loosen those muscles before running.

Athletic trainers know which injuries are common in specific sports, so they often work with coaches to modify training regimens based on an athlete's condition. "We can prevent injuries by removing or minimizing

Athletic trainers are available during sporting events and practices to evaluate and treat injuries.

Athletic trainers help athletes recover from injuries.

specific drills or exercises on days the athletes need a break," says Thompson. After a hard practice, for example, an athletic trainer would recommend that athletes avoid lower body exercises that might tire out and injure their legs.

But the precautions athletic trainers take can't always prevent an athlete's injury. When an injury occurs, athletic trainers evaluate its type and severity by considering how the injury happened and by asking the athlete how he or she felt at the time of injury and how painful it feels during evaluation. They test the athlete's range of motion and check muscles and tendons for swelling and tenderness.

Depending on the results of the evaluation, the athletic trainer chooses different ways to treat the injury. General treatment includes the uses of first aid, ice to minimize swelling, antiseptics to disinfect cuts, and braces to protect an injured limb.

Specific treatments depend on the athletic trainer's evaluation of an athlete's injury. For example, if the athlete can put weight on an injured leg and still walk, then icing and wrapping the injured area might be enough until the athlete sees a physician. If the athlete can put weight on the leg but can't walk, then the athletic trainer can provide crutches. But if the athlete can't put weight on the leg and feels a lot of pain, then the injury might be more serious—such as a fracture—and the athletic trainer would get the athlete to an urgent-care center or emergency room.

For more serious injuries, athletic trainers rely on an athlete's physician to test, diagnose, and treat injuries. Athletic trainers cannot prescribe medication, take x rays, or order laboratory tests, for example. At the physician's discretion, however, athletic trainers may continue to treat minor injuries.

Athletic trainers also help athletes recover from injuries. Rehabilitating major injuries usually requires the help of a physical therapist, but athletic trainers may continue treatment when the athlete's condition has improved. And athletic trainers may need help from physical therapists because of time constraints. "It's difficult to rehabilitate every injury, because we simply don't have the time," says Tricia Irvin, a high school athletic trainer employed by a medical center in Granger, Indiana.

Athletic trainers design a program to help each athlete to recover from injury and to regain strength, balance, speed, flexibility, or range of motion. Rehabilitation exercises typically become progressively difficult as the athlete recuperates, such as increasing the incline on a treadmill or the weight on barbells. Once injured athletes have recovered completely, athletic trainers allow them to compete again. "We want the athlete to return to playing the sport at full functional ability," says Thompson.

When not helping athletes, athletic trainers may manage medical inventory, check the integrity of safety equipment, and track injuries and treatments.

Athletic trainers get to know their athletes well and help them develop as both athletes and people. Athletes may turn to them for help with problems at school or at home. "We are almost like parents," says Thompson. "We listen to their problems and try to guide them in the right direction." Irvin agrees. "You need to be patient," she says.

Because of budget constraints, not every team employs its own athletic trainer. Sometimes, a single athletic trainer cares for two competing teams or athletes. That's not a problem, say athletic trainers, because their concern is to ensure the safety and health of all athletes. "We are not rivals, like the schools," says Irvin. "We are our own team."

Employment and wages. In May 2011, there were 18,240 wage and salary athletic trainers, according to BLS. They earned a median annual wage of $42,400. The lowest earning 10 percent made $26,170 or less, and

Athletes play for fun—and, sometimes, pay

Athletes are crucial to the sports that employ coaches, athletic trainers, sports officials, and related workers. After all, without athletes, there would be no athletic competitions.

However, few competitors make a living as professional athletes. While many athletes are unpaid, their dedication to their sport is often similar to that of professionals. These amateur athletes compete in recreational sports or school leagues for personal enjoyment—and the chance to eventually compete professionally. "Even when I'm not making a penny, I just love competing," says David Tran, an amateur boxer from Germantown, Maryland.

Athletes spend a lot of time training for competition. "I wake up most mornings at 5:30 a.m., work out for an hour, and then practice for 3 hours," says Stevi Robinson, a professional volleyball player from Hermosa Beach, California. It usually takes many years of preparation to gain the ability and skills required to compete at the highest levels.

Athletes must prepare for the physical demands of their sport, and they practice in order to improve their own abilities. They also focus on functional movements, such as sprinting or jumping, to hone the technical and strategic demands of their sport during competition. For example, Tran spends hours practicing footwork, punching, and defensive techniques so they become second nature. "Boxing matches are a blur," says Tran. "You have to rely on your instincts and preparation."

For athletes, both professional and amateur, it's the thrill of competition that makes their preparation worthwhile. "We practice and live for the game," Robinson says. "The game is everything."

the highest earning 10 percent made $65,970 or more.

Most athletic trainers work full time at postsecondary schools and medical facilities, such as hospitals and medical offices. A few athletic trainers work part time and are paid hourly. Some may work under contract.

Qualifications. To enter the occupation, athletic trainers usually need at least a bachelor's degree from an accredited athletic training program. These programs teach students what they need to know to become an athletic trainer, from injury evaluation to rehabilitation. For a position at the college or professional level, athletic trainers usually need work experience and a master's degree.

Most states require that athletic trainers pass a national certification exam and register for a state license.

Additional requirements include continuing education and yearly cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) certification. Every 3 years, athletic trainers must complete 70 hours of continuing education to keep up with advances in the field. Classes, seminars, and lectures help fulfill this requirement.

Athletic trainers need to be detail oriented to keep track of athletes' injuries. They also need good communication and interpersonal skills so they can explain injuries and treatments to athletes and their families.

Sports officials

Umpires, referees, and other sports officials oversee an event's rules, athletes, and coaches to ensure safe, fair, and neutral play. To keep competitions fair, sports officials enforce the rules, inspect equipment, start and stop play, track the contest's time, and settle disputes. They may also penalize reckless play or eject unruly players or coaches to keep competition under control. "Our responsibility is to enforce impartially and err on the side of safety," says Barry Mano, a former sports official and now president of the National Association of Sports Officials in Union Grove, Wisconsin.

While working, sports officials place themselves in the best position to watch athletes. If they spot a violation of the rules or need to make a decision that affects play, sports officials rely on their experience and judgment to make the right call. Some sports officials also have the option to review video.

Sports officials use tools to signal to athletes, coaches, and spectators. These include waving colored flags to indicate an infraction, blowing a whistle to stop and start play, or firing blanks from a gun to start a race. Sports officials also frequently use hand signals. For example, a basketball official may raise three fingers while the ball is airborne to signal to scorers that a successful basket will be worth three points.

Experience helps sports officials make the correct call.

Depending on the sport, there may be one or more officials during play. Individual sports, such as boxing, may need only a single official. Team sports often have multiple officials, each of whom has different duties. For example, in soccer, a main official blows the whistle to start play and stop for infractions, two officials on the sidelines determine offside violations, and another official in the press box keeps track of time.

Most sports officials need to wear a uniform. They may also need to wear sport-specific equipment, such as shin guards, watches, skates, or helmets. Sometimes, the equipment and uniform is different for officials in the same sport but in different roles. For example, in baseball and softball, the home plate umpire wears a uniform, face mask, chest pad, and shin guards—but the first base umpire wears only the uniform.

Sports officials attend seminars before, during, and after a sport's playing season to refresh themselves on the rules, learn changes to the rules, and network with other officials and league staff. Mano says that these seminars allow sports officials to become better at their work and help them move up the career ladder.

Meetings before and after each game help officials review their calls, evaluate their performances, and learn from mistakes. "It takes practice and hard work to become a better official," says Rob Livengood, a basketball official in Mount Airy, North Carolina.

The priority for sports officials is to make the right call, let the game flow, and intervene only when necessary. "I want to be invisible," says Livengood. "The focus should be on the game, the players, and the fans."

But officials sometimes make mistakes. When they do—or when they make a correct but controversial call—fans, athletes, and coaches may become critical. Experience, confidence, and humility help sports officials cope with the pressure. "If you listen to the fans, you'll think you're the worst official on the planet and need glasses," says Livengood. "Unless you grow a thick skin, you'll go home and cry."

Sports officials signal infractions by using tools, such as flags.

For sports officials, being questioned about the calls they make is part of the job. And when fans air their displeasure at the right call, officials must be confident that their judgment was fair. "You have to love the officiating process more than the sport," says Mano. "You have to love it when they boo you."

Employment and wages. In May 2011, there were 15,630 wage and salary umpires, referees, and other sports officials sports officials, according to BLS. They earned a median annual wage of $23,190. The lowest earning 10 percent made $16,910 or less, and the highest earning 10 percent made $50,190 or more.

Most sports officials work for leagues in spectator sports, schools, and recreational associations. Anecdotal evidence suggests that most sports officials work part time under contract. Because many sports have playing seasons, some officials may work in multiple sports.

Qualifications. No formal education is required to become a sports official. However,

prospective sports officials must pass an officiating test to become licensed with their particular association. An association committee evaluates sports officials in scrimmages and assigns them to games based on those performances.

Officials may need to be physically fit, depending on the sport. For example, a lacrosse official runs up and down the field numerous times per game, but a tennis official stays in one place for the duration of the match. Communication skills are also important, says Livengood: "You need to work as a team with the other officials and communicate clearly in a potentially hostile environment."

Advancing to more competitive leagues requires experience. For example, an official must work many years at the high school level before being considered for jobs at the college level, where there are fewer games and tougher competition for available positions.

Through experience, officials develop what Mano calls "game intelligence," the ability to manage the competition and its players. Experience also helps officials gain the judgment they need to make the right call—and the confidence to defend it.

Kick off a career in sports

Sports careers teach skills, such as discipline and accountability, that extend beyond the playing field. Many sports workers learn to work in teams and communicate well with others. Sports careers also promote physical and mental fitness. "It keeps me in shape," says Livengood, "and helps me think strategically, too."

The best way to get started in a sports career is by gaining experience at lower levels of a sport and working your way up. For example, sports workers in recreational leagues can develop their skills under less stress and with more job opportunities. They can also learn from experienced workers by volunteering as assistants.

Sports-related jobs are usually available at local schools and with amateur leagues and recreational and athletic associations. Positions for volunteers and for part-time work are often advertised in newspapers and on school, organization, and association websites. Although these positions often pay little or nothing, they offer the opportunity to learn the basics of sports work.

Many sports workers gain experience as athletes or enthusiasts.

Workers can also gain experience by networking through the many leagues available at the amateur and high school levels. The sports community is small, so knowing the right people—such as those who run the leagues—eases the jobseeking process. Family and friends who participate in a sport are also valuable resources. "Good networking produces good results," says Gehrke.

Of course, the demands of a sports career mean it's not always fun in games. Many sports practices and competitions are held outdoors, including in extreme temperatures and bad weather. Sports workers might need to be outside for hours in those conditions.

Sports workers might also have irregular schedules, sometimes working 7 days a week—including evenings, weekends, and holidays—to accommodate sporting events. And although some sports are played seasonally, preparation continues year round.

Travel may be frequent, especially at more competitive levels. That can strain personal relationships. "I spend a lot of time away," says Mano. "It can be tough on family life."

Despite the difficulties, those working in sports often say that the good outweighs the bad. "It's not easy work," says Thompson, "but if you have the passion to keep you going, it might be right for you."

For more information

The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (*OOH*) has detailed information about many sports-related occupations, including the ones described in this article. These profiles have information about each occupation's job duties, employment, wages, usual qualifications, and more. The *OOH* is available online at **www.bls.gov/ooh**.

There are many athletic and coaching associations, each specializing in a particular region, sport, or demographic. The national associations for each sport are often the best sources of information for athletes and coaches, providing career resources, rules of the sport, and local contacts. For example, jobseekers interested in volleyball coaching should visit the American Volleyball Coaching Association at **www.avca.org.**

For information about becoming a volunteer coach in youth sports, an option for coaches to gain experience and move into paying positions, contact:

National Alliance for Youth Sports
2050 Vista Parkway
West Palm Beach, FL 33411
Toll free: 1 (800) 688-5437
nays@nays.org
www.nays.org/coaches

For more information about becoming an athletic trainer, including career and educational resources, contact:

National Athletic Trainers' Association
2952 Stemmons Freeway #200
Dallas, TX 75247
(214) 637-6282
www.nata.org

And for more information about becoming a sports official, including guides for many popular sports and a list of athletic associations by state, contact:

National Association of Sports Officials
2017 Lathrop Ave.
Racine, WI 53405
(262) 632-5448
www.naso.org