



WORKING IN
**SPORTS
MASSAGE**

WITH INPUT FROM



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WORKING IN
**SPORTS
MASSAGE**

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

From teams who enlist a traveling massage therapist to weekend warriors seeking to ease post-event muscle strain, there are many opportunities for massage therapists who are looking to specialize in treating athletes.

With increased knowledge and research about the therapeutic benefits of massage, acceptance of the belief that regular massage therapy can aid in an athlete's recovery, rehabilitation and performance continues to grow...and that's great news for both new and experienced massage therapists alike.

From the environments you'll encounter to the importance of a sound and thorough education, this guide contains the information you'll need to help decide if working in a sports massage setting could be the right fit for you.

EDUCATION

Along with your standard massage education (most programs require at least 500 hours), a better-than-average understanding of anatomy and physiology along with kinesiology, pathology and orthopedic assessment will be expected. You should know the principles of the rehabilitation process and where massage can be most beneficial within that process. Another key to working with athletes is the ability to quickly and accurately assess the problem presented while knowing how massage should be integrated to enhance the overall treatment program for the athlete.

SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

In addition to massage skills, you will need to understand the role of the other health care practitioners that will be working with that athlete. These might include athletic trainers, physiotherapists, nutritionists and physicians. You'll need to be able to communicate with the health care team members and physicians using the correct anatomic

terminology. Understand the difference between sprain and strain, for example.

→ **Know how or if massage is being integrated at the clinic or with the team already.** Become familiar with the standard treatment protocols already used in the athletic clinic where you'd like to practice and identify how massage can easily be integrated into those processes.¹

Just like any work environment, effective communication is key to overall success, but, more specifically, you should be able to speak the same language as the athletic trainer and all involved in the sport. Research has shown that, when it comes to exercise, massage has many benefits including reduced muscle tension, increased range of motion, improved soft tissue function and reduced swelling.²

→ **Be confident in your skills as a massage therapist** in addition to the proven positive effects that massage therapy can have in improving an athlete's performance. Be prepared to explain this connection to other members of the sports health care team.

ATHLETES VS. NON-ATHLETES

Many massage therapists enjoy working with athletes because they tend to have a keen awareness of their bodies. What's more, elite athletes tend to be in top-notch physical condition, and the injuries they have are usually recent, making it easier for the therapist to pin-point what's causing the pain or discomfort. They are receptive to the plan the therapist develops and more likely to do the in-between "homework" recommended

by the therapist. Athletes are wired to push themselves to the limits, so be prepared to push yourself, too. However, watching an athlete achieve his or her performance goals can be quite rewarding for the therapist who played an important role in readying the athlete for competition.

UNDERSTAND THE SPORT

In addition to anatomy and physiology, massage therapists must also have a thorough understanding of the sport they want to work within. Familiarize yourself with the training regimen, competitive practices of the sport and common massage modalities used so you'll be prepared to ask the right questions.

Study up before you begin working with any team or group of athletes: What are the common injuries associated with the sport? How does the athlete use his or her body? What are the overstressed areas? Be able to accurately identify the muscles and other areas of the body you're going to be referencing. This is where your courses in anatomy and physiology come into play.

STAY CURRENT WITH RESEARCH

Keeping up-to-date with research is an important aspect of sports massage, particularly because establishing credibility is key when hoping to develop professional relationships. Read the research and journals that other sports health care professionals read, and focus your attention on the well-supported benefits and structural effects of massage therapy.¹

Knowing the Benefits

Those who participate in exercise programs, as well as athletes in training, can benefit from massage therapy.²

RESEARCH HAS SHOWN THAT MASSAGE THERAPY CAN:

- Reduce muscle tension
- Help athletes monitor muscle tone
- Promote relaxation
- Reduce muscle hypertonicity
- Increase range of motion
- Improve soft tissue function
- Support recovery from the transient immunosuppression state⁶
- Support the recovery of heart rate variability and diastolic blood pressure after high-intensity exercise.
- Decrease muscle stiffness and fatigue after exercise
- Decrease delayed onset muscle soreness
- Reduce serum creatine kinase post exercise
- Reduce swelling
- Reduce breathing pattern disorders

More on AMTA Position Statements: amtamassage.org/positionstatements

Questions to Consider:

Do I fit the general education requirements that practicing sports massage requires? **Do I have an above average knowledge of anatomy and physiology?** Does being part of a team of health care practitioners sound like the right professional setting for me? **Am I interested in working with athletes and the challenges their injuries and schedules present?**



WHAT TO EXPECT

YOUR WORK ENVIRONMENT

Likely, your work is going to take place in much shorter sessions than it would at a private practice or spa-like environment. It's not uncommon for the massage session to last just 15-20 minutes. And, the goals of each session might be very limited, such as to reduce spasm, pain or edema in a particular muscle group. So, you might have to adjust how you think about your work, moving from the holistic view of massage therapy to a more targeted perspective.

Expect long and fast-paced hours.

If you're traveling with a team, you might be forced to leave home for several weeks or even months while the team is in season. This could include both domestic and international travel. Self-care and proper body mechanics are extremely important for your prolonged success in a rigorous work environment.

Depending on the event or sport, your work setting can change drastically. If you're working outdoors at a marathon, your "work" space may be no more than a table set on grass under a tent and your climate will be dictated by Mother Nature. You will need to take into account the state of the athlete you're working on as well—strenuous events can cause dehydration, cramping and more. Know how to be sensitive to these conditions.

At indoor venues, the training or locker room might only include a small area with many massage therapists working side-by-side. You might be set up in a hotel room or other non-traditional space. And don't expect a lot of privacy—a high profile sporting event might include on-lookers such as coaches and press and even video cameras.

Many sports massage therapists will do contract work for a team in addition to running a private practice. While still strenuous, private practice provides some relief from the elements and the chaos you'll encounter at an event or training site.

GETTING THE JOB

The Right Resume:

For a position with a sports team, you will want to emphasize any experience you have that includes working directly with athletes and/or at sporting events. Did you volunteer at a local 10k run or walk? Has a client ever relied on your skills to help them complete a marathon or triathlon? Add these events and experiences to your resume to help you gain credibility. If applicable, describe a specific treatment plan you developed for your client in your cover letter.

As always, include any special certifications you hold and the continuing education courses that you have completed specifically related to sports massage. The position you're applying for might require a special certification; if not, be sure to highlight this advanced education whether it is in trigger point, myofascial release or another modality. Proofread your resume for errors and typos before applying to any position. Better yet, ask a peer who has worked within sports massage for ideas on what will make your application stand out among other candidates.

Making Contact:

Knowing who makes the hiring decisions, as well as the other members of the sports health care team and their qualifications, roles and responsibilities, is important. Often times it's the head athletic trainer who decides how a massage therapist will fit in with the rest of the team. Don't assume the coach is who you should approach about a position.

One way to build connections is to get involved with your AMTA Chapter's Sports Massage Team. If you're volunteering, take it as an opportunity to educate the participants on the therapeutic benefits of massage. Get your name out there and establish yourself locally as an expert in sports massage. For more local opportunities, visit AMTA's



Volunteer Connections at [amtamassage.org/volunteer](https://www.amtamassage.org/volunteer). Here, you'll find ways to get involved in community walks and other events.

The Interview Process:

Emphasize the therapeutic nature of massage therapy. Be ready to demonstrate your techniques as well as discuss the rationale for every massage modality you use. Be comfortable discussing the desired outcomes of specific modalities. Know the specifics of the sport, muscles used and the common types of injuries.

If you can, shadow a massage therapist who works at an athletic facility for a week

or longer. Knowing what to anticipate at the environment where you'll be interviewing will help alleviate some of your nerves. Unless otherwise specified, business casual dress is a minimum for any job interview.¹

CONTINUING EDUCATION OPTIONS

A passion for continuing education is expected in most work environments and vital to your continued relevance as a massage therapist. Check out courses offered at the AMTA National Convention, AMTA's Online CE Courses or seminars offered through your local chapter and other industry organizations.

Questions to Consider:

Do I tend to excel when working in a non-traditional, fast-paced environment? **Am I comfortable quickly assessing a sports injury and making recommendations?** At this point in my career, do I have the flexibility to travel for long periods of time? **Do I have connections in sports massage?** Do I need to work on building my resume and experience?

IN THEIR WORDS

What's it really like working in the trenches of sports massage? What skills are most valued by athletic trainers? Read on for answers from some very experienced sports massage therapists.

LEE STANG, LMT AMTA-CT CHAPTER, CORE MASSAGE THERAPIST, WOMEN'S TENNIS ASSOCIATION

DESCRIBE SOME OF THE WORK ENVIRONMENTS YOU'VE BEEN A PART OF.

I've worked in a variety of exciting environments including the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics, the Greece Paralympic Summer Games and on the road with the U.S. National Powerlifting Team. Plus, I have worked with collegiate, ABL and WNBA athletes. Currently, I travel with the WTA (Women's Tennis Association) as part of the sports science and medicine team. In my private clinic, I specialize in orthopedic massage.

WHAT IS A TYPICAL WORK WEEK LIKE FOR YOU?

On the road with the WTA is intense but energizing! I have traveled to Paris, Madrid, Istanbul, Monterrey, Acapulco as well as sites in the U.S. The day generally begins at about 7 a.m. with breakfast, followed by a team meeting. On the first day, we cover every player as well as their individual needs before and after a match. We arrive onsite in the training room one hour prior to play—work can include anything from a quick warm-up of a shoulder to cutting tape for an athlete to prepping sports drinks or ice and towels.

Once play begins, the massages start. Players can sign up for 30, 60 or 90 minutes of specific massage. If not scheduled for a massage session, massage therapists work in the training room doing spot treatments, warm-ups and even paperwork. It is not uncommon in the middle of the week to have a few days that go until midnight, but the days fly by and it is tremendously exciting.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF WORKING IN SPORTS MASSAGE?

For me, the opportunity to work with individuals who have such an awareness of their bodies is exceptional. You and the athlete are a team. Locating an area of dysfunction, aiding in the relief or facilitating improvement in the area, then watching the athlete go out and perform well is uplifting. The environment is charged. What's more, learning from health care professionals while teaching them how massage fits into overall health and wellness is just plain awesome!

Challenges include breaking into the sports arena. Often, massage is not viewed as a primary service. If you do get hired by a team or individual, the travel schedule can be daunting. Long hours, little sleep and being away from your family and business can be really difficult. Finally, the work is very physically challenging. This can take a toll on the massage therapist; exceptional body mechanics and self-care practices are essential.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER TO THOSE LOOKING TO SPECIALIZE IN SPORTS MASSAGE?

Expect to work hard breaking into the sports environment. Get additional training in orthopedic massage and functional assessment, clinical massage, myofascial work and stretching. Start by getting involved with your AMTA Chapters' Sports Massage Team; this provides excellent hands-on experience and each event looks great on a resume.

**LAURA STEVENSON-FLOM,
LMT, CKTP**



Advanced training in sports massage will allow the therapist to understand the indications and contraindications of the specific work.”

WHAT KIND OF EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE DOES A MASSAGE THERAPIST NEED TO WORK IN SPORTS MASSAGE?

First and foremost, a sports massage therapist must have an excellent understanding of anatomy and physiology. Being an expert on how the body works is essential to being able to effectively provide safe and appropriate massage. Advanced training in sports massage will allow the therapist to understand the indications and contraindications of the specific work. In addition, therapists must be well trained in first-aid response, thermal injuries, dehydration and musculoskeletal injuries.

WHAT MAKES WORKING WITH ATHLETES DIFFERENT FROM WORKING WITH OTHER CLIENTS?

I have found that most athletes and sports enthusiasts have a keen sense of their own bodies. Athletes are anxious to know what they need to make their bodies perform at their optimal level. One of the responsibilities of a good sports massage therapist is to help the athlete identify areas of chronic tension that could lead to impaired performance and injury. An athlete will quite often come for very specific work including muscle strains and ligament sprains, rehabilitation of a

disabling injury, or for work on the areas of the body that will be stressed most during the competition or activity. The massage may also be for a shorter period of time, 15 minutes and up is not uncommon.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF WORKING IN SPORTS MASSAGE?

Being a sports team massage specialist is very rewarding. I have been able to help enhance the well-being of athletes, help optimize their performance, help prevent common injuries and provide relief to the physical discomfort that goes hand in hand with exercise. As a sports massage specialist, I am qualified to do sports massage at events on the local, national and international level. I have found athletic events are wonderful ways to network with other massage professionals as well as market my business and meet prospective clients.

ESTEBAN RUVALCABA, LMT

DESCRIBE SOME OF THE ENVIRONMENTS WHERE YOU HAVE PRACTICED.

In addition to my office, I have worked in a variety of environments, including outdoors at triathlons, marathons, bicycle races and track meets. I've worked under tents, canopies and other open structures in weather ranging from sunny, hot and humid to freezing cold with snow, sleet and freezing rain. Indoors, I've practiced in arenas, training rooms, hallways and hotel rooms, sometimes with little climate control. Working at the NCAA indoor track and field championships, I often found myself crammed next to other therapists in a tented space, some of which sloped downhill. Aside from my office, the other venues seldom afford even a hint of privacy. At national championships, cameras, news reporters and coaches are everywhere.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF WORKING IN SPORTS MASSAGE?

Working in sports massage is both challenging and rewarding. Benefits include working with motivated individuals who want to get better and who appreciate any effort that helps them excel. Because athletic injuries are usually fresh, the therapist can see how an injury to one muscle or joint affects posture, movement, pain and more. It is also fun

working with people who are well and trying to get better.

The principal challenges have to do with the long hours, the unusual environments and the sheer volume of treatments that require significant stamina. Meals are often rushed and sometimes missed altogether.

ARE THERE SPECIFIC TRAITS THAT HAVE HELPED YOU TO BE SUCCESSFUL?

A love of anatomy and kinesiology as well as being methodical in nature have been helpful in my practice. The use of good body mechanics has allowed me to do this kind of work for almost thirty years.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER OTHER MASSAGE THERAPISTS LOOKING TO SPECIALIZE IN SPORTS MASSAGE?

A therapist wishing to pursue a career in sports massage needs stamina, an inquisitive mind, a passion for learning, a love of travel (and the freedom to travel) and the flexibility to adjust to constantly changing environments. The therapist also needs to be able to separate his work from the success of the athlete. The therapist's job is to enable the athlete to achieve a higher level of performance; the athlete's job is to achieve that higher level.

“A therapist wishing to pursue a career in sports massage needs stamina, an inquisitive mind, a passion for learning, a love of travel and the flexibility to adjust to constantly changing environments.”

ROGER OLBROT

WHAT KIND OF EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE DOES A MASSAGE THERAPIST NEED TO WORK IN SPORTS MASSAGE?

I believe that to be a successful sports massage therapist, the person must have a high level of proficiency in anatomy, physiology and kinesiology. It is not enough to know the attachments of the muscles. The therapist should know the many actions and the reverse actions of muscles. Other techniques might include myofascial release, cranial sacral therapy, lymphatic drainage and orthopedic assessment. The therapist is often called upon to assess where the trouble may be and then apply that knowledge to the rehabilitation of the athlete. The therapist should also have a good foundation in hydrotherapy modalities including cryotherapy and thermotherapy. These can be invaluable to the recovery, repair and healing processes.

WHAT KIND OF SPORTS MASSAGE ENVIRONMENTS HAVE YOU WORKED IN?

I have worked in a gym setting working with many professional athletes. I have also worked at three Olympic games and dozens of events. I maintain a private practice where I work with semi-professional and weekend warrior athletes.

WHAT MAKES WORKING WITH ATHLETES DIFFERENT FROM WORKING WITH OTHER CLIENTS?

Athletes tend to know their bodies fairly well, so information presented to the therapist seems to be better. Compared to the general client, the athlete is also in good shape and is concerned about getting back to the field of play as soon as possible. Some athletes have an obsessive compulsive behavior about their sport. This generally makes them very compliant with the therapists' recommendations.



WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF WORKING IN SPORTS MASSAGE?

I keep my skills of assessment and observation sharp. At times I feel like an emergency room doctor, trying to assess the nature of an injury and work with it quickly. I work with many doctors and physical therapists; this helps to advance the acceptance of massage as a viable part of athletic training. I also get to interface with many coaches and athletic trainers, again, allowing me to educate on the benefits of massage and further bridge the gap.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU OFFER OTHER MASSAGE THERAPISTS LOOKING TO SPECIALIZE IN SPORTS MASSAGE?

I think that anyone wanting to excel in sports massage first needs to get out there and work with athletes. This might include volunteering at different events. Don't stop your study of kinesiology. I find it fascinating that we are still finding out so much about the body including muscular actions and the ways that muscles work with other parts of the body. Find a mentor in sports, if you can, and talk with them, work with them. Get your feet wet in the field.

READ MORE PROFILES OF SPORTS MASSAGE THERAPISTS ONLINE:
amtamassage.org/SportsMassage

BENEFITS & WAGES

AVERAGE INDUSTRY WAGES

On average, massage therapists working in athletic facilities earn \$54.50 per hour. That includes a \$43.52 average hourly rate and an average tip of \$10.98.

SETTING

AVERAGE HOURLY PAY

(excluding tips)³

Sole Practitioner:	57.24
Health Club & Athletic Facilities:	43.52
Hospital/Medical Office:	41.36
Spa/Salon:	39.01
Chiropractic/Integrated Clinic:	39.40



GRATUITIES

Across the profession, the average tip amount is \$12.48. However, clients are tipping more frequently—37 percent of therapists reported receiving tips 80-100 percent of the time in 2013 compared to just 30 percent in 2011. Gratuities should be graciously appreciated but never expected.

BENEFITS

In 2013, 35 percent of massage therapists reported receiving health benefits from their employers. Benefits packages can include health insurance, paid vacation and sick time, and continuing education programs.³

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

As many sports massage therapists learn, starting locally is often the most efficient way to build a steady client-base and resume. If you're just starting out, check out the opportunities to work and volunteer at local events. Even seasoned massage therapists can benefit from increased exposure.

Introducing an athlete to his or her first massage can act as a powerful marketing tool.

Continue to build and advance your skill-set. Look into certification programs in the type of massage that interests you most. According to the AMTA Massage Profession Report, massage therapists are using an average of seven modalities/techniques.³ While it's important to have a diverse skill set, special certifications and advanced training can help differentiate you from other massage therapists who are targeting similar clients.

No matter which direction you ultimately decide to pursue, time spent practicing massage in a sports environment can open many doors for you. A collaborative spirit along with the ability to be a quick-thinking team player will help you stand out in any workplace.

In 2013, **29%** of massage therapists reported that new clients found them through participation in community or local events.



MASSAGE THERAPY CONSUMER TRENDS

MASSAGE IN NUMBERS: Roughly **34.9 million** people received a total of **143 million** massages in 2013.

SEEING THE RESULTS: **88%** of consumers see massage as effective in reducing pain and **88%** of consumers agree that massage can be beneficial to overall health and wellness.

MASSAGE FOR MEDICAL REASONS: In 2013, **43%** of massage consumers got a massage for medical reasons, a significant increase from 2010.

RELIEVING PAIN & INJURY RECOVERY: Consumers who received massage for medical reasons cited using massage to relieve pain, alleviate soreness and stiffness, and recover from injury.³

EMPLOYMENT OUTLOOK

OUTLOOK FOR THE MASSAGE THERAPY PROFESSION

Employment opportunities are expected to grow for massage therapists.

According to the most recent U.S. Department of Labor information, employment opportunities for massage therapists are expected to grow at a faster than average rate as more people learn about the benefits of massage therapy. Between 2010 and 2020, employment of massage therapists is expected to grow by 20 percent, faster than the average rate for all occupations.⁴

CAREER PLANNING

It's always important to be thinking ahead about your ultimate career goals in the massage therapy profession. If you're still unsure about which path is best for you, gaining some exposure to different work settings is never a bad idea. If you're an AMTA member, you can leverage connections you've made through your chapter and at other events. AMTA's community of 56,000 massage therapists is a great place to make the connections that can help you progress and flourish in your career.

PRO TIP:

Get involved in the sports medicine scene by subscribing to the journals that athletic trainers and physical therapists read, *The Physician and Sportsmedicine*, for example. Or, consider becoming an associate member of the National Athletic Trainers' Association. These things not only get you name and face recognition, but really help bolster your education on current research, modalities and rehabilitation techniques.

—PAT ARCHER, MASSAGE THERAPIST AND CERTIFIED ATHLETIC TRAINER

RESOURCES

AMTA ONLINE CAREER GUIDANCE

Whether you are a seasoned massage therapist or just starting your career, AMTA's Online Career Guidance section offers a wealth of resources to expand or jump start your career—including a special section for massage therapists choosing to work in a sports massage setting, a career path assessment quiz and other installments of the *AMTA Career Success Series*.

amtamassage.org/CareerGuidance



ONLINE COURSES

AMTA's online courses are a convenient way to earn your CEs and enhance your knowledge in the areas of business, ethics, various massage modalities, client populations and self-care. More than 50 courses are currently available. amtamassage.org/learn



AMTA NATIONAL CONVENTION

Network with colleagues and advance your skill set at this annual event. Access 35 continuing education courses focusing on hands-on learning as well as the business-side of the profession.

amtamassage.org/education

AMTA JOB BANK:

Visit AMTA's Job Bank to search for massage therapy jobs, or post your resume online to gain exposure to potential employers.

amtamassage.org/jobbank



AMTA'S MENTORING PROGRAM:

Improve your communication skills, make connections and set future goals through AMTA's Mentoring Program.

amtamassage.org/mentoring

SOURCES

1. "Practicing Sports Massage," *Massage Therapy Journal*, Summer 2011.
2. "Massage Therapy for Those Who Exercise," AMTA Approved Position Statements
3. *2014 AMTA Massage Profession Research Report*
4. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*.

Originally published in 2012. Reprinted with updated research in 2014 © 2014

ABOUT THE AMERICAN MESSAGE THERAPY ASSOCIATION

The American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA) represents 56,000 massage therapists. AMTA works to establish massage therapy as integral to the maintenance of good health and complementary to other therapeutic processes; to advance the profession through ethics and standards, continuing education, professional publications, legislative efforts, public education, and fostering the development of members.

More information/ join:
amtamassage.org



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