

THE FIRST ATHLETIC TRAINER

Back in 1881, James Robinson paved the way for today's athletic trainers.

By Matt Webber, MA, ATC



If one were to ask a member of the sporting world in 1880 to define what an athletic trainer was, they probably would have described a track coach. Athletics generally referred to track and field, and a “trainer” was one who helped athletes, two- and four-legged, to prepare for competition. In 1881, an athletic trainer “branched out” in his duties to begin the modern athletic training profession.

James Robinson began competing in athletic competitions when he was 20 years old. It was reported long after his competitive days that he was a “champion amateur walker” in England, competing in races between one and twenty miles.

In 1874, Robinson began studying veterinary medicine. When Robinson immigrated to the United States around 1878, he claimed to be a veterinary surgeon and a horse trainer. More than likely, he was qualified only to be a veterinary assistant. He began to work in the stables of Judge Henry Hilton in Saratoga, N.Y., spending his first two years in America training horses.

Robinson was still interested in athletics, and he began working with the athletes at the Harlem Athletic Club in late 1878. In the spring of 1881, Robinson was hired to help the rather woeful Harvard track team. Robinson was listed as the “trainer” for Harvard football during the 1881 season, a responsibility that would mostly involve conditioning the players. Being a successful athlete was the major qualification that was looked for in early athletic trainers, and Robinson met that standard.

In early October 1881, modern athletic training began to emerge. In addition to Robinson, many other early athletic trainers

would coach track and work with other teams at their schools. The emphasis of the athletic trainers focused on physically preparing the athletes for their competition and not the strategies of playing the game. Early college football teams were often coached by the team captain or a recent alumnus who usually overworked the players, necessitating the employment of someone knowledgeable of conditioning.

It is unknown what, if any, medical services Robinson may have provided that first football season, but it is likely that he dealt with minor injuries while preparing the players for games. He did not tape any of the players because taping techniques and even athletic tape had not yet been invented.

Robinson had a room in the Hasty Pudding Club Building—possibly the first AT facility—but nothing has been found on what activities went on there or any equipment that may have been provided. However, one can imagine a room with tables for rubdowns with various liniments and bandages available for use.

In April 1882, Robinson signed a two-year contract to work at Harvard. Soon thereafter, the faculty at Harvard passed a rule banning the employment of ex-professional athletes and Robinson’s contract with the school was voided. The student newspaper, *The Harvard Crimson*, raised quite a fuss about Robinson being let go but to no avail. Robinson moved on and Harvard would hire the second known athletic trainer, James Lathrop, in 1883.

Robinson spent a brief time working with the track team at Columbia and was hired by Princeton in 1884. At Princeton, he coached the track team and worked as the athletic trainer with the football and baseball teams. Later, he worked with basketball (once the game had been invented) and ice hockey.

After a few years working with the Manhattan Athletic Club, Robinson returned to work for Judge Hilton. He trained horses and dogs and helped Hilton set up events for the Saratoga Athletic Association. In 1896, Hilton “loaned” Robinson to the University of Michigan to work as its athletic trainer for football and to coach track for a year.

When Hilton died in 1899, Robinson accepted the athletic trainer position at Yale, which involved working with the football, basketball and baseball teams while also coaching the track team. In 1900, Robinson returned to Princeton. He remained there as athletic trainer until his death on March 19, 1906.

James Robinson and the many other early athletic trainers for colleges and founded what is now the athletic training profession. They had to create the scope of their occupation, develop a body of knowledge and find the techniques that allowed them to complete the tasks before them. While they were not competent by today’s standards, they were deemed successful using the standards of their time. They laid the foundation for many of our current practices and are owed a debt of gratitude by all in the profession.

This article is an excerpt from Dropping the Bucket and Sponge: A History of Early Athletic Training, 1881-1947, by Matt Webber. More information about the book and other athletic training history items can be found at AthleticTrainingHistory.com.

Editor’s Note: You can look for regular AT history posts from Matt Webber on *NATA Now*, the official blog of the NATA News. Visit the blog at nata.org/nata-news-blog.