

## THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

## Sideline Docs Are a Team's Key 'Player'

Football in the storied Big Ten Conference means big-time pressure, high expectations from alumni and fans, and intense media exposure. So when the college football season hits, Dr. Greg Rowdon, head team physician for the Purdue University Boilermakers, braces himself for a whirlwind of activity and time away from his wife and two daughters.

"It's like being an accountant during tax season," he said of the time commitment. "We play 13 games in a row this season. I'm gone [from home] for 13 weeks on Saturdays, either here on campus or away." He's also on the sidelines for all football practices.

Dr. Rowdon has a split appointment at Purdue in West Lafayette, Ind. Half of the time, he treats musculoskeletal injuries at the University's student health center. The other half is spent treating football players and other athletes.

"The best thing about being a sports medicine doctor is that you are working with young, healthy, motivated people [who] want to get better," said Dr. Rowdon, who received his undergraduate degree in electrical engineering/biomedical engineering from Purdue. "You don't have to counsel your patient on weight loss or stopping smoking."

Sometimes he has to "hold athletes back because they want to get back on the playing field" as soon as possible after an injury. "They're very anxious to do that; they'll do almost anything you recommend to them as far as helping them get back on the playing field."

Building relationships with staff and players is another benefit of the job, he said. "There are some athletes that you hit it off with and you become a friend, and you keep that relationship going."

Before joining the Purdue staff in June of 2005, Dr. Rowdon was the team physician for the now-defunct Indiana Firebirds professional arena football team in Indianapolis, as well as for a couple of area high schools. He has also held medical staff posts with the National Institute for Fitness and Sports, the Nike All-America Basketball Camp, the RCA Professional Tennis Tournament, and the National Football League, where he helped conduct physicals for the draft.

His first experience covering team sports came during a rotation with a sports medicine group in Indianapolis while he was an internal medicine resident at Indiana University Medical Center. "I asked if I could get involved with some team coverage," he recalled. "I would switch my call schedule off of Friday night and pick up Saturday or Sunday so I could cover the high school football team on Friday night."

All of this experience has spoiled him, he said, like when he attends a non-Purdue athletic event as a spectator in the stands instead of from the sidelines. "I can't sit in

the stands anymore like a regular fan and watch a game because I'm not close enough," he explained. "For me, it's very hard to go watch a game where you're not involved in the actual game itself."

He makes up for lost family time during the summer when school's out of session. "The athletes may be on campus working out or going to summer school, but there's not a lot [of organized activities] going on, so summers are very nice," he said.

During football season, his wife, who is also a Purdue alumnus, joins other spouses of team staff for tailgate parties before home games. "They become a nucleus," Dr. Rowdon said. "She comes to all of the games and is in the stands."

His two children attend almost every home game as well. His older daughter is a freshman at Purdue.

"Every day it goes through my mind how lucky I am to be doing what I'm doing with my alma mater and taking care of kids who are fun to be around and fun to take care of," he said.

#### From 'Skins Fan to Team Doctor

Football season consumes much of Dr. Anthony M. Casolaro's time as well. As chief medical officer of the NFL's Washington Redskins for the past nine seasons, he's been on the sidelines amid the buzz of Monday Night Football games and during match-ups with such rivals as the Dallas Cowboys.

"A reward is feeling part of a team," said Dr. Casolaro, a pulmonologist with Virginia Hospital Center in Arlington. "Having grown up in Washington, that's made it a lot of fun. One of the caveats is that you can't be a fan while you're the doctor. You really have to be able to separate that part of it."

He logs the most hours during the team's training camp in northern Virginia. There, "we end up treating people for heat cramps or heat exhaustion. These are world-class athletes, but that doesn't prevent many of them from having medical problems," he said. "We have four or five young men with asthma. We have had young men with insulin dependent diabetes, [and] young men with high blood pressure. You take care of the coaches and the staff also."

Dr. Casolaro landed the job after one of his former professors of medicine at George Washington University, in Washington, retired from the post. He recalled walking in to the Redskins' administrative offices to interview with then team owner John Kent Cooke. He saw former Redskins players Sonny Jurgensen and Bobby Mitchell, "my childhood heroes. I saw the Super Bowl trophies. After that, I knew I was interested in doing it."

Once the NFL season starts, he holds a clinic at the Redskins facility every Thursday afternoon, and he's on the sidelines for all of the games. His three children, aged



Dr. Greg Rowdon (right), helping an injured player off the field, is on the sidelines during all games and practices.

18-22, sometimes join him on away games. "The family can't come on the team plane, but they might join me in a city, like New York, Philadelphia, or Tampa Bay," he said. "New York is an annual trip that they all try to go to."

Dr. Casolaro said he finds fulfillment in the relationships he forms with the coaches, staff, and some of the players. "You often end up helping their families when they have medical problems," he said. "You act as an advisor. But mostly [the players are] your patients. Many of them will come to see me even after they've retired from football."

He said that, in the care he provides to the team, he considers the best interest of each player. "I've worked with five coaches and two owners, all of whom have said, 'the most important thing is that you take care of the players and do the right thing for them,'" Dr. Casolaro said. "People don't view that because you see movies and TV shows where it looks like teams, coaches, or doctors will compromise a player's health to win. That is just not the case. It's anything but that."

For the Redskins, he continued, "the medical team is part of the team. For example, let's say you have a player who has asthma. Maybe he doesn't feel well [so you] maximize his treatment regimen. Then he plays very well. You feel a part of that [success]. Coach [Joe] Gibbs has given me and the orthopedic surgeon on our team game balls for our help in winning important games."

In his office, Dr. Casolaro displays a game ball from last season's 14-13 win over the Cowboys.

#### Helping MLB Rookies Get on Track

Every January, Dr. Robert L. Pyles joins about eight other mental health professionals who serve as consultants for Major League Baseball's rookie development program. Each MLB team sends three promis-

ing rookies to the event, where, over the course of a long weekend, they get advice from veteran players and experts on everything from how to deal with the media to how to manage their finances.

During one part of the program, the Second City comedy group performs a series of skits that depict situations the rookies might find themselves in as players, such as "scams, like getting roped in by professional gamblers," said Dr. Pyles, a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who practices in Wellesley Hills, Mass. After the skits, the players break into small groups of 8-10 for discussion; each group is moderated by a mental health profes-

sional and a veteran baseball player.

"There's a lot of talk in the group about psychological techniques for enhancing athletic performance, but there's also a lot of talk about what a strain this kind of life is on [having] a stable relationship, and a lot of [talk] about tension in the clubhouse, tensions between ethnic groups, that sort of thing," said Dr. Pyles, who is also the current president of the Massachusetts Psychiatric Society.

At the end of the program, Dr. Pyles gives the players his contact information and tells them they can call him confidentially if they need help. "On average, I hear from one or two of the players in the group at some point," he said.

Dr. Pyles' interest in helping young athletes dates back almost three decades to when he suffered a stress fracture in his foot 10 days before running his first Boston Marathon. "I got clinically depressed; I couldn't believe it," he said.

His orthopedist told him that it's common for athletes to become depressed or anxious when they get injured. "I got interested in the whole phenomenon and interested in the role of athletics for how some people really cope with life," he said.

Specifically, Dr. Pyles said, he learned to appreciate the importance of sports to an athlete's psychological and emotional well-being.

"These are mostly young people who have had sports at the center of their lives since they were small," he said of the MLB rookies. "Their talent was recognized early, and they have been supported and adored in many ways. There's a tremendous amount riding on making it or not making it. When they can't [compete] anymore because of injury or aging or whatever, it has a huge effect on their [lives]."

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau