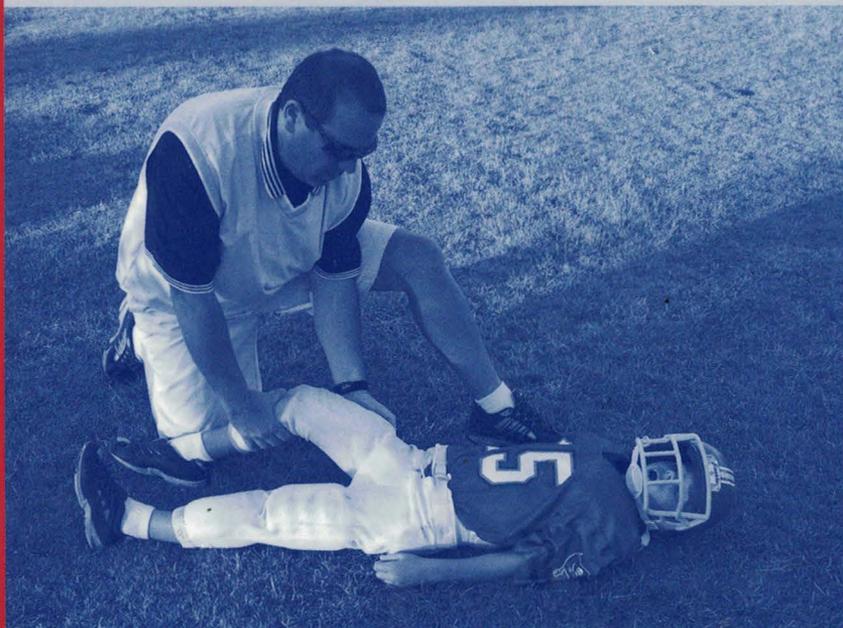


Behind the Scenes as a Team Physician

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SAUNDERS

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Balancing Life as a Team Physician

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When I think of balancing acts, including my own, the first image that comes to mind is one of those old photographs depicting a circus artist slowly walking across a wire strung high above the center ring. The lights in the big tent are dimmed and the crowd stares up at the solitary figure, wondering if the worst could possibly happen while, of course, being simultaneously thrilled, because in the darkness below there is no net.

Invariably, these daring acts ended happily, with the circus barker proclaiming the performer's great courage, even as the clowns rushed into the center ring with their huge, grotesquely painted smiles and glittering eyes. If any of my friends should happen to be reading this, let me quickly make it clear that the remark about clowns was not intended to be a subtle reference to the man I married. He is not a clown. But he has certainly had a few, shall we say, entertaining moments. For example:

We were traveling together with friends in Kenya several years ago, touring game preserves, and I had brought along a basic medical kit in case there was a problem. When we arrived at a well-known resort called "Ol Malo," my husband pointed to a small crowd of Māsaï women and children congregated around the resort's entrance gates.

"Who are those folks?," he inquired of the resort owner.

"Well, those are just some locals who are looking for something to eat. The drought has been severe. Now, the men are away taking care of their cattle and goats, looking for water and food," the man replied.

My husband stared at the rather pathetic scene for a moment. "You know," he said, turning to the owner, "I can't help you with the drought, but my wife is an orthopedic surgeon and she's got a medical kit with her. I'm sure she'd be willing to help if any of those people back there have health problems."

Lesson number one is that it's tough to strangle someone sitting behind you in the back seat, but as the Range Rover hurried through the gate, the ranch owner turned to me with a smile and said, "Hey, that's really nice of you to offer. I'll keep that in mind."

Exactly 1 hour later, I was hustled aboard a private helicopter with my ridiculously inadequate medical kit and whizzed away to tend to a neighboring

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rancher who, I was told, had just been gored by an elephant. My husband, of course, was sound asleep the whole time, taking his afternoon nap.

I washed out his wounds with what appeared to be an antiseptic solution. He had back pain. Fearing I might find a tusk wound in his back, I rolled him over. Skin intact and pain left flank-kidney contusion, I thought. He was biting his knife handle for pain control. I asked for assistance in opening the normal saline. A nearby Samburu warrior immediately whipped out his machete and whacked off the top of the saline bottle with one swipe. I politely said "Thank you."

Fortunately, this particular balancing act ended happily. I got the injured rancher stabilized; intravenous started, and cleaned out his wounds before he was transported by another helicopter to a hospital in Nairobi. I remember, as I rode back to the ranch, thinking about how unpredictable accidents are. And how alike they all are, too, as they lie in wait to spring at us from the shadows, confident that we will never see them coming. Best to be on your toes, then, your eyes wide open, and on your good days, trembling with anticipation.

MY PERSONAL TEN COMMANDMENTS

Balancing my job as a sports medicine doctor with my interests in research and training and the demands of my family and friends has been a great challenge, a kind of high wire act on a daily basis, occasionally with no net. But here they are: my personal "Ten Commandments" for maintaining your balance. A few may seem obvious, but don't be deceived. The easy sounding ones are often the most difficult to follow.

Do the Right Thing, Always, no Exceptions

A famous coach at the University of Kentucky, where I was once the team physician, confronted me about medical advice I had given to one of his players. The student had had an anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) reconstruction several years before and was unstable with a meniscus tear and early arthritis. He wanted to continue playing (don't they all) and put off the surgery to post season.

"Doc," he said, "if I hurt my knee again could it affect my pro career"?

"Yes," I replied. "More importantly, it could affect you. I am not sure you can play the rest of this season, much less in the pros. You will do harm to yourself if you play on an unstable knee and you may have pain in the future, even with everyday activity."

"I want to play now. I'm not worried about the future. Can I play this season"?

I told him. "No. Don't take a chance on a life-altering injury in hopes of playing this season or making it in the pros. Have the operation now."

When he heard about the advice I had given his player, the coach immediately hauled me into his office and, when I refused to change my tune, I was replaced as the team physician. So, even if it hurts you, even if it hurts the

team and the coach, don't budge an inch when it comes to the welfare of the individual athlete. And no, I'm not going to mention the coach's name. There are too many coaches just like him who will not take their eyes off of winning and, when they submit to a "win-at-all-costs" method of coaching, they are not the team physician's, or the athlete's, friend.

It is Better to be an Advocate than Curse your Competition

This particular commandment is based loosely on an old proverb, "It is better to light a candle than curse the darkness."

The first fact of life most physicians must face is competition for patients, and this is especially true in the field of sports medicine, where the most gifted athletes are also local or even national celebrities. If you are a female in a medical specialty heavily dominated by men—intelligent, aggressive, successful men—you should become an advocate for issues that really mean something to you. Currently, only 2% of board-certified orthopedists are women, but more women in sports will inevitably mean more women in sports medicine in general and more women in orthopedics specifically. This is a good thing, for the profession as well as female athletes. Those of us blazing the trail for these future physicians should grab every opportunity to mentor and encourage young women to consider orthopedics as a female-friendly specialty.

Don't Demand Respect from Players and Coaches, Earn it

A number of people made a big deal out of the fact that I was the first woman in America to serve as team physician for a Division One team. But what really made me proud was the day I read a quote in the newspaper from a University of Kentucky football player who said, "We don't classify her as a woman or man—just like it doesn't matter if you're white or black. What matters is she knows what she is doing." I did know what I was doing, and the players could tell.

Loyalty is the Weakest of Human Values

I've never had a contract with any of the high school, college, or university sports programs I've worked with. That means I basically provided the service (ie, attending the games and practices, examining and treating the athletes on the field and in the training room) for free. I employed the athletic trainers and the school stipend was 30% of their salary. Over 10 years I donated (not tax deductible!) a lot of time and money. From this relationship, the practice grew, but insurance reimbursements fell. I was unable to "donate" these services. When another medical group bid on taking over my high school relationships, basically offering to pay the entire salary of all the school athletic trainers, the school board completely ignored my years of free service. One of the board members remarked during a hearing: "We should look at this just like we look at contracts for providing milk to the cafeteria." I did not even get a "thank you" for 10 years of service. If you lose a team or patient, get over it. There will be other opportunities. Focus on what you can change.

Communicate: Team Physicians Must Always be Available to Athletic Training Staff

If I were prioritizing these commandments, this one would rank near the top of the list. To build scholarship as well as your practice, develop a relationship with athletic trainers. Encourage them to ask the hard questions about injuries and to challenge you, the team physician, with questions. They can become close friends, but more importantly, they will definitely be members of your support team. Let the athletic trainers do their job on the field, meaning it's probably a mistake to run out to the middle of the field every time a player goes down. Wait for the athletic trainers to signal you.

In Order to Hit the Mark, One Must Aim a Little Higher

Everyone needs goals. Everyone has aspirations. But I have found that striving for a lofty goal is a better process than setting more limited, more achievable goals. Growing up, I enjoyed competing in any sport; however, I did not set my goals high enough. Like most of us team physicians, I was an athlete competing in any sport I could. I particularly enjoyed playing center forward on the field hockey team, but excelled in swimming. As a high school graduate of 1970, prior to Title IX, I was discouraged from swimming in college. I was lost without the structure swimming gave me. I made better grades and was more organized, not procrastinating when I was organized in the swimming. I continued to swim until almost all the way through medical school and retired in 1977 with a top 10 world ranking in breast stroke. I unsuccessfully tried out for the Olympics in 1972 and 1976 in swimming. I did not give up. On my third try, I made the Olympics as a US Olympic Committee team physician, in Barcelona in 1992.

Enjoy your Role as Team Physician

Be passionate about the opportunity to do what you love. Being a team physician is truly a privilege. Enjoy your time with team travel. Shopping is a good side benefit, and you always win at shopping despite what the football team may do. If you've got the tools to get through medical school and an orthopedic residency, then it's a good possibility that you didn't earn your position by complaining all the time. So if you foul something up, make the wrong call in a tense situation, and get your name in the paper under "Lawsuits Filed Today," the last thing you should do is complain to people about the problem you're having. Nobody ever feels sorry for you, and besides, as all politicians know, sooner or later it will all be forgotten. Life goes on.

Remember the five A's: Availability, Ability, Affability, Advocacy, Affiliation

Be available, able, and affable, affiliate with sports medicine associations, be an active member and be an advocate for your peers. I go to about 16 different meetings every year and I belong to several physician associations. Contributing to these organizations advances scholarship and research. It puts down roots with your colleagues in the field of sports medicine, and it networks all

over the map. And when you need help yourself, either for a referral or maybe just a few words of advice and support from a friend, you will be glad you went through the hassle of air travel and hotel accommodations.

Human beings are fragile creatures with occasionally alarming and completely unpredictable psychological inclinations. Keeping your own act on an easily observable higher plane serves as a good role model to others, and late at night, allows the right sense of humility, self-awareness and, yes, balance to re-emerge.

Dare to Care

I have had the pleasure of working with three great long-term football coaches: Jerry Claiborne and Bill Curry at the University of Kentucky, and Roy Kidd at Eastern Kentucky University. These coaches truly cared about their players, families, and medical staff. They were like father figures to the players and taught these young men to be fine gentleman. These coaches instilled the goal of doing the right thing in the athletes. A football team is truly a family. The great coaches allowed me to direct the medical decisions and I let them coach—winning or losing! If I had been blessed with children, I would have been so proud for my sons to play for these great men. They never challenged the medical decisions.

My mother and father instilled in me their beliefs and commitments for me to respect and care and know right from wrong. Sports medicine is all about athletes; it is all about doing the right thing. Dare to care.

Don't Forget your Family and your Friends

I am not a parent, unless you count my beautiful Rhodesian Ridgeback (Belle) or my cats (Rascal and Thumper), or my husband, who thinks stubbing his toe is a near-death experience. But if you took the first nine of these so-called commandments and piled them up on one side of a balance pole, high above the center ring and with no net, this final one would easily bring the whole seesaw of life back to horizontal all by itself.

At the end of the day, we all have to go home. We all need a refuge, perhaps occasionally a shoulder to cry on.

My daddy died in 1992. I was called at the training room by my father's physician, who was at his bedside, and he told me to return quickly, that my father was going to die soon. Well, he died holding hands with his family on November 1, 1992—All Saints Day. Even in his last moments, he pressed my hand and wanted to know what he could do for me.

My mom is still here and I cherish every single minute I have left with her, and as I write these concluding words, I am sitting on my back porch on a cool, clear October afternoon in Kentucky. I can hear a high school band practicing off in the distance, and the leaves of the old sycamores in my backyard are turning to gold and swirling down one by one, and I do feel that my sense of balance is still here, never perfect, but still here, somewhere in the center of everything.