

Editorial

"In My Experience... Pearls from the Pro-Level - Tips on Being a Successful Team Physician"

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This article is about my experience as a team physician, having taken care of two professional sports teams, the Miami Dolphins and the Florida Panthers, for over a decade.

I will share some tips and pearls that I've learned along the way to help you be a successful team physician. Here is my Top Ten List:

NUMBER ONE: The Three A's – Availability, Affability & Ability. When it comes to being a team physician, the three A's are slightly different than how we think about it in our normal practice. For "availability", it is basically being available 24-7, 365 days a year. In sports, we often talk about an in-season and an off-season. In reality, especially at the professional level, there is no off-season anymore. Even when you're not covering games, you are performing offseason surgeries, attending the combine, preparing for the draft or managing injuries that happen during the off-season training activities (OTAs). All of these activities require your full attention. Additionally, the team will view you not just as the doctor for the players but for the entire organization. You will be called upon to help players, coaches and their families as well as other members of the organization. Bottom line is you **NEED** to be available. The other A is "affability". In this setting it means not only

being able to connect with a wide variety of people but also being comfortable in different environments. Many of us are accustomed to being in a hospital or a clinic setting, but you also need to be comfortable in a training room, a locker room, or on a sideline. This can be a challenging transition for many physicians. You probably want to leave your white coat in the office. It's a little too stiff and typically doesn't go over well with the players. Knowing how to interact in the locker room is critical for success.

The final A is "ability". Ability to me in this context is experience. Unfortunately, there is no textbook, webinar or CME course that can teach you how to do this job. It's really about being there and seeing things over and over. I've had the privilege of working side by side for many years with my friend and mentor, Dr. John Uribe. I am fortunate enough to learn not only from my own experiences but from his experiences as well. I encourage anyone who's interested in this field to lean on a senior partner. Sometimes people come out of training and want to be THE guy, but I think

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Dr. Yagnik received his undergraduate degree from Duke University, where he graduated Magna Cum Laude and Phi Beta Kappa. He then graduated at the top of his class in medical school at the University of Pittsburgh and was elected to the Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society. During medical school, he performed surgical research that yielded two prestigious grants from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. During his residency at the University of Pennsylvania, he was elected administrative chief resident and was given the Willard Award for the most outstanding resident. He completed his orthopedic sports medicine fellowship at the Doctors Hospital/UHZ Sports Medicine Institute in Miami Florida.

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it's very important to have an experienced mentor that you can learn from.

NUMBER TWO: Humble & Respectful. These are two things that will benefit you in any aspect of your life, especially in the world of sports medicine. Surgeons are used to being the stars of the show, but when it comes to taking care of a team, it is important to check your ego at the door. The stars are on the field. No player wants to be injured. No coach wants to have their players injured. As team physicians we are a necessary evil. If we are not busy on game-day, then that is great for the team. Ideally, you want to be invisible but available. When called upon, you do need to be confident in your decision-making, particularly on the sidelines, but there's really no place for arrogance. The players will pick up on that, and it can undermine your credibility in the locker room. It is also important to be open to second opinions. Medicine is an art, not a science. Every player is different. Every injury is different. It is therefore important to consider other opinions. In fact, I have developed relationships with many of our second-opinion doctors and have learned a great deal from them. Leaning on these experts, particularly when it is outside of your area of expertise, can be truly beneficial. The goal in the end is to get the best possible care for your players. If you always keep that goal in mind, it will help you in your career.

Number Three: Value Your Head Athletic Trainer. To me, the Head Athletic Trainer (ATC) is the most important person on the entire medical staff. There are three people in my life that have special ringtones, my wife, the Dolphins ATC, and the Panthers ATC. I always pick up their calls. I view my role as their consultant. They run medical. They are with the players and coaches all the time. They know what's going with the team, and I'm there to be their consultant and to assist them. Over the years we have developed a strong working relationship that is based on mutual trust and respect. Having this kind of collaborative relationship is key to a successful sports medicine program.

Number Four: Build a Great Team Around You. It takes a village to take care of high-level teams. You can't possibly be an expert in everything. Being able to have good team of subspecialists that you can rely on, that you can have a relationship with and that you can help coach and mentor is critical. Remember, not everyone does a sports fellowship or has been in a locker room. They may be a phenomenal hand or spine surgeon but you will need to help them understand the environment in which they're getting into and how to interact with players, coaches and agents. It is important to not just send your players to them in a vacuum but to work collaboratively with them and guide them through the process.

Number Five: Watch Your Language. What do I mean by that? Players will hang on your every word. You want to be careful about how you say things and when you say things. We always talk about having "One Voice". If I'm saying you have an MCL sprain, our head trainer is saying you have an MCL sprain, and then someone else comes along and says, "you have an MCL tear," to us orthopedists it's

the same thing, but to a player you just blew their mind. Choose your words carefully and avoid giving hard time-lines. Everything is day-to-day or week-to-week because everyone responds to and heal from injuries differently. You want to make sure you allow yourself some flexibility and wiggle room to adapt to each players unique situation.

Number Six: Be Consistent. I see my role as a team physician really as a problem solver. Typically, if I'm getting a call from one of my trainers, they've already attempted to address the issue, and they're looking for me to help solve the problem and not to rebound it back to them. Being able to do that consistently is very important. It's also important to be consistent on how you treat everyone. Whether it's the star quarterback or the 53rd player on the roster, giving them your full attention and assistance, no matter who it is, is very important. Players are very perceptive and that type of inconsistency can negatively impact you in the locker room.

Number Seven: Maintain Your Professional Integrity. You're there as a doctor, not a fan. I remind our fellows about this each year when they start their fellowship. Sometimes you will be interacting with high profile athletes and it is important not to abuse your access by asking for things like selfies or autographs. You are there as a professional and want to maintain a professional work environment. You do not want to undermine your role or the trust that the players may have in you. Occasionally you may feel pressure, either internally or externally to do certain things. That's the time to really focus on the medicine. I try and stay uninformed about players individual contract situations or their future status with the team. I do my best to focus on each players unique medical situation and then care for them the right way regardless of any outside noise.

Number Eight: Flexible & Adaptable. I've had the privilege of working with a number of athletic trainers, coaches and general managers over the years. Each one of them is unique and wants to organize the medical program in their own way. Being flexible will allow you to adapt to their style and will help you be successful in the long run.

Number Nine: Develop a Thick Skin. Particularly in high-profile sports, you are going to hear a lot of comments and criticism from the media, agents, friends and even family members, regarding certain medical decisions. Most people commenting will have very limited information about the situation. You need to accept that you have no means of defending your decisions or providing true and accurate information to the public. You just need to be able to ride out the tough times and focus on your job.

Number Ten: Family Support. Doing this job will put a significant strain on your personal life. It is essential to have a very understanding and accommodating family as they will suffer the most. You're going to miss many important events like school functions, birthdays, weddings, holidays, and soccer games. Having a supportive and understanding family is key to a long and successful career.

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