



Building Your Sports Podiatry Practice

Five past presidents of the American Academy of Podiatric Sports Medicine weigh in with advice.

BY JOLYNN TUMOLO

When Robert M. Conenello, DPM, FACFAS, talks about what it takes to achieve success in sports podiatry, the words he uses could just as easily apply to the athletes he treats: Drive. Commitment. Perseverance. Grit.

“You always have to do more than expected to get to the next level,” said Dr. Conenello, owner of Orangetown Podiatry in Orangeburg, NY, and host of the podcast RPM2.



Dr. Conenello

He has served as the global clinical advisor of Special Olympics International and was president of the American Academy of Podiatric Sports Medicine (AAPSM) from 2012-2013. “You have to be willing to work hard to get the things you want.”

For podiatrists like Dr. Conenello, a deep love of the game and of podiatry makes sports medicine a slam-dunk specialty. For these clinicians, spending a Saturday afternoon on the sidelines isn’t a hardship. Speaking to groups of amateur athletes is community outreach at its most natural. And calling the organizer of an upcoming sporting event to volunteer medical services is likely to generate the same level of eagerness on both sides of the line.

“I just love sports, and most people who go into sports medicine

love sports,” said Tim Dutra, DMP, MS, MHCA, FACSM, FAAPSM, an assistant professor and clinical investigator at the California School of Podiatric Medicine at Samuel Merritt University, Oakland, CA, and a podiatric consultant for intercollegiate athletic teams at the University of California, Berkeley. “As a sports podiatrist, you have the opportunity to be around a lot of different activities,



Dr. Dutra

who was AAPSM president from 2006-2007. “I got into podiatry because it’s the perfect specialty area for sports medicine. It’s a natural fit.”

All-Star Match

Foot, ankle, and lower extremity expertise, combined with biomechanics proficiency, leaves podiatrists with much to offer athletic patients.

“The majority of sports out there

“As a sports podiatrist, you have the opportunity to be around a lot of different activities, on-site events, and games. You can be on the field, and you can work in the clinic.”—Dutra

on-site events and games. You can be on the field, and you can work in the clinic. At Cal Berkeley, we have over 30 teams. It’s fun as an athlete and an active person to actually see a lot of different activities and be involved in the treatment of injuries. We get to go to a lot of great sporting events.”

If this sounds like piece of action you want in on, Dr. Dutra has good news: There is plenty of opportunity out there in athletics, and podiatrists are especially well-suited for the job.

“I was an athlete, an athletic trainer, and a coach,” said Dr. Dutra,

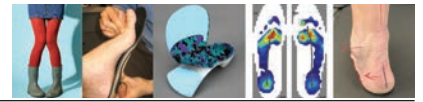
are very much influenced by being on our feet,” said Dr. Dutra. “Even athletes who may not be on their feet for their sport, like swimmers, do cross-training and may have foot problems. The other thing that makes podiatrists unique is our biomechanics background. The study of human movement, and things like walking gait vs. running gait, is really the foundation of a lot of what we do.”

“Our specialty concentrates on the anatomy, physiology, biomechanics and mechanisms of foot and ankle injuries,” added

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Dr. Ross



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sports podiatrist Jeffrey A. Ross, DPM, MD, FACFAS, an associate professor at Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, TX. “We just don’t ‘fix’ the problem. We recognize the etiology of the injury, trace it back to the biomechanics, and intercede to prevent recurrence of those overuse injuries.”

Doug Richie Jr., DPM, FACFAS retired and past owner of Seal Beach Podiatry Group, agreed that podiatrists are a step ahead of many sports clinicians, especially when it comes to conservative approaches.

such as the American Academy of Podiatric Sports Medicine and the American College of Sports Medicine, sports podiatrists advise. Attend local and sports medicine seminars. Ask seasoned sports podiatrists and biomechanics experts to allow you to shadow them or even potentially serve as mentors. (“It worked for me,” said Dr. Ross.) For those with the time and money, formal sports podiatry fellowships are also an option.

“Never stop learning,” advised Stephen Pribut, DPM, FACFAS, a

tioner must also consider current practice models and trends,” added Dr. Pribut. “You are not likely to do this alone, but rather as part of a group practice. The group may be an all-podiatrist group, a “supergroup” or it could be a multi-specialty group. To become a go-to person for sports medicine, it is essential to collaborate with others in your group and within the field. Strive to make yourself a valuable team member.

Start with the amateurs, the experts coached, and gradually work your way up to higher-level athletes. Volunteer your services to youth club and school sports, which, according to Dr. Dutra, are some of the most fun and rewarding gigs anyway.

“They’re very excited to be treated like an athlete. The kids see how professional and elite athletes are treated and can identify with that,” he said.

Offer to provide free medical services at local runs and races. Get to know the coaches, trainers, and participants—better yet, become one, too.



Dr. Pribut

For podiatrists looking to further their sports-specific skills and know-how, a number of options are available.

“Understanding lower extremity function and then implementing biomechanically oriented treatments with foot orthoses, footwear modifications, and home-directed treatment programs, the podiatric physician stands above all other specialties in providing unique and valuable service to the athlete,” said Dr. Richie, who developed the Richie Brace for athletes and other patients in 1996.



Dr. Richie

“You have to be able to recognize how abnormal gait can lead to overuse injuries. Having an understanding of computerized gait and pressure analysis is essential,” continued Dr. Ross, who served as AAPSM president from 1995 to 1996. “Having a working knowledge of various sports and their potential impact for developing foot, ankle, and lower extremity injuries is a must. It also helps to have that knowledge so the podiatric physician can communicate more intelligently with patients involved with those sports.”

For podiatrists looking to further their sports-specific skills and know-how, a number of options are available. Join and be active in groups

sports medicine podiatrist in private practice in Washington, DC.

Getting in the Game

To get your name out in the athletic community, join sports organi-

zations you’re interested in and offer help where needed.

“The ideal first step is to participate in sports. Sports participation is great preparation to help you understand the dynamics of movement. Participation may also help you understand the mindset,” said Dr. Pribut, who served as AAPSM president from 2005-2006. “Service is better than marketing. Participation and volunteering is a sincere way to become known while being helpful to the sporting community.”

“Today’s sports medicine prac-

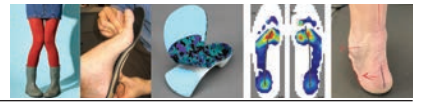
“Understanding lower extremity function and then implementing biomechanically oriented treatments with foot orthoses, footwear modifications, and home-directed treatment programs, the podiatric physician stands above all other specialties in providing unique and valuable service to the athlete.”—Richie, Jr.

“Just participating yourself, running 10K races and marathons, will expose you and your name to the running public,” said Dr. Ross, who has more than a dozen triathlons and 25 marathons under his belt.

Dr. Conenello’s rise to global clinical advisor of Special Olympics International began with a stint volunteering in his community to provide free Healthy Athletes screenings and services to participants who are underserved.

“I started out on the local level

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helping out, and they saw my passion and my motivation to keep going and asked me to help out at the state level. I was picked to be a national adviser, and then went on to become the global adviser,” said Dr. Conenello, who recently stepped down from his global duties due to other commitments. “I got the opportunity to travel to so many different venues across the world—Korea, Japan, China, Ireland. It’s been amazing. What a great ride it’s been.

“Now I’m the clinical director for the state of New Jersey, and we’re having state games in 2 weeks. It’s so much fun. It’s pure athletics. Those are the purest athletes you can see who are just doing it for a love of the sport.”

Seasoned sports podiatrists also recommend promoting your expertise through informational talks to local athletic groups on relevant topics like injury prevention for specific activities and treatment for common injuries. Write educational articles for print and online sports publications, or start your own blog online. Social media posts offering worthwhile ad-

Above all, persevere. And don’t make the mistake of expecting big opportunities and payback early on.

“There are very few paid opportunities in sports podiatry. Whether at the Olympic level all the way down to youth soccer, your participation as a podiatrist will be volunteer,” said Dr. Richie. “It’s always reward-

athletes are paid to play, but it can also be an issue at the youth level—especially when the grown-ups involved harbor unrealistic views of the treatment process.

“Parents and coaches can influence expectations and goals, so their compliance and support is very important,” said Dr. Dutra. “Many parents

“The average athlete is very involved with their treatment plan and in getting well.” —Ross

ing, but do not expect this to immediately bring patients into your office.”

Motivated, Demanding—and Appreciative

When athletes do present for care, expect a slightly different breed of patient. Athletes are typically more educated, motivated and positive than other patients, and they often have higher incomes and a willingness to pay out-of-pocket for services or orthoses insurance doesn’t cover. With that, however, can come greater demands, more worries, higher ex-

think their child is going to become the next superstar Olympic athlete, and you have to help them see the overall perspective of what we’re trying to do: help them get better, keep them active, and not rush them back to the sport only to get reinjured.”

Under-promise and over-deliver is a patient care philosophy that Dr. Dutra said has served him well in his dealings with athletes.

“Don’t make promises and timelines that aren’t realistic,” he said.

If possible, avoid surgery in favor of more conservative treatments, Dr. Ross recommended.

“The athlete who requires surgery can even be more challenging,” he said. “Attaining the ‘perfect’ result is something they will expect. Attaining reasonable goals, again, is a topic for discussion with patient.”

But help athletes succeed in their quest to return to activity, and you’ll see some of the most grateful patients possible.

“I’ll give you a great example that happened this week,” said Dr. Conenello. “I have a Division II female basketball player who was getting nowhere with her doc. She came to see me, and I did something for her that was very different from what everyone else tried, and she was able to get back on the court right away. She came in my office, surprised me with a card and a small gift, and said ‘Thank you for making a difference in my life so I can get back to doing what I love.’ When athletes can’t participate, it’s devastating for them. That gesture really touched my soul.”

“Being able to see and treat pa-
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“I started out on the local level helping out, and they saw my passion and my motivation to keep going and asked me to help out at the state level. I was picked to be a national adviser, and then went on to become the global adviser.” —Conenello

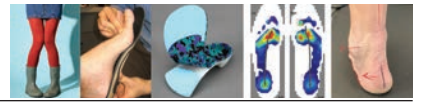
vice have the potential for a global reach. Finally, don’t overlook your local independent sports outfitters and running retailers. After 26 years in practice, Dr. Conenello is still a familiar face at his local running store.

“I volunteer there once a month. Patients come in, and we have the opportunity to just talk,” he said. “When they leave, they say, ‘You know, you’re a good person to talk to. I got some answers from you. I’m going to go visit you.’ That’s how you get involved. You market yourself and become a sports medicine doctor by doing and being real.”

Expectations, and longer appointments.

“The average athlete is very involved with their treatment plan and in getting well,” said Dr. Ross. “They typically will take more time during that office visit; they can be very needy. You need to be patient with them and make yourself available. If you aren’t willing to spend the time, then don’t treat athletes. But the reward is so worth it in the final analysis.”

An eagerness to return to activity is common but can turn problematic when it overshadows a sports podiatrist’s treatment plan. This isn’t unusual at the professional level, where



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tients over the lifetime of a practice is special, and nothing beats that,” Dr. Pribut reflected. “Today I saw a patient that I had not seen in 18 years, since he moved to the West Coast. We’ve been in touch through Facebook for the last few years. He just completed a local 100-mile ultra race and was in this area long enough to see me for a visit before heading back home.”

Oh, the Places You’ll Go!

Appreciative patients and complimentary admittance to all sorts of events aside, sports podiatry can lead to once-in-a-lifetime thrills that enrich an already rewarding career.

For Dr. Conenello, advancing his ultramarathon education let him right to the Sahara Desert, where he observed a RacingThePlanet event he will never forget.

“I spent 2 weeks out in the Sahara learning all about training these ultramarathoners,” he said. “I’ll be honest with you, I never camped a day in my life before that. But I camped out there in the Sahara Desert under the stars, and the next thing you know, I have all these ultramarathoners coming to see me because I have experience with it and know what they’re going through. That was definitely one of the most amazing events I got involved with.”

For Dr. Pribut, watching his patients retake their playing fields after overcoming injury has been as interesting as it’s been gratifying.

“It has been fun to go backstage at the ballet and to go into professional locker rooms. It has also been memorable to see your athletes participating in events as diverse as ballet to track and field,” he said. “To see a ballet dancer perform a role, an actor able to move around the stage athletically, and an athletic opera singer sing, jump, and duel in ‘Don Giovanni’ have been great experiences.”

Dr. Dutra relishes the opportunity to promote a healthy lifestyle among young and old alike—his sports-minded clientele has included Senior Olympians in their 80s and 90s.

“It is truly inspiring to be around such active, passionate people. It’s a

fun career,” he said. “You meet a lot of great athletes of all age levels. It’s been fun because I love kids, I love older people, and I love everyone in between. It’s perfect.”

Dr. Ross counts among his fondest moments running the Austin marathon and half-marathons with former Texas Gov. Rick Perry and the Marine Corps, as well as participating in Little Rock Marathons with former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee.

“Seeing my father at the end of the Boston and London marathons and my mother at Tavern on the Green at the finish of the New York City Marathon were other memorable moments,” he said. “What a great

the American College of Sports Medicine as well, the largest sports medicine organization in the nation, made up of academic, clinical, and research members. Becoming a Fellow is a great opportunity and there are too few of us currently. The ABMSP has a board certification in podiatric sports medicine, and the ABPM has a CAQ in Podiatric Sports Medicine. Those young podiatrists wishing to be team podiatrists need to demonstrate advanced training and certification if possible to stay current with our sports medicine colleagues.”

But the bottom line seems to be: sports podiatry does not disappoint, the podiatrists agree.

“Being able to see and treat patients over the lifetime of a practice is special, and nothing beats that.” —Pribut

outlet to a well rounded podiatric medical career. I would do it all again in a heartbeat.”

Sports Podiatry and Biomechanics

Dr. Dutra offered some additional thoughts about the changes in sports podiatry that have taken place in recent years. “Sports podiatrists have progressed from treating mainly runners to treating athletes from all sports, which I think is huge. Biomechanics has set us apart, as we have a great understanding of motion, demands of the sports, and sport-specific orthotics in treating and preventing injuries. We are hoping to address evidence-based sports medicine research and teach this in our podiatry curriculum. We have been utilizing our Motion Analysis Research Center for biomechanics and sports medicine-related research studies, utilizing biomechanical faculty with PhD to help us collect data and work with us on studies. And we need to publish research from our colleges of podiatric medicine.”

Cultivating a relationship with other sports medicine organizations is another strong recommendation from Dr. Dutra. “I found it very important to be involved in more than just your specialty organization and I recommend that you get involved in

“I still encourage any student or resident I meet to seek further training in sports medicine,” said Dr. Richie. “It is the best part of podiatric practice.”

About the AAPSM

The American Academy of Podiatric Sports Medicine serves to advance the understanding, prevention and management of lower extremity sports and fitness injuries. The AAPSM believes that providing such knowledge to the profession and the public will optimize enjoyment and safe participation in sports and fitness activities. Their aim is to accomplish this mission through professional education, scientific research, public awareness, and membership support.

For questions on membership benefits or any other aspects of the AAPSM, please contact Executive Director Rita Yates at ritayates2@aol.com. PM



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