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Curve condemns Kruse to success



Roger Kruse, the University of Toledo sports teams' head physician, has served as a team doctor for four U.S. Olympic teams.

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In Their Words is a weekly feature appearing Sundays in the The Blade's sports section. Sports writer John Wagner talked with Roger Kruse, UT's head sports physician.

Dr. Roger Kruse has been involved in four Olympics, not to mention numerous football bowl games and basketball tournament contests.

Not bad for an athlete who concedes that his downfall was "the Big 10 curveball."

Kruse has made his mark as a physician who has spent better than 25 years caring for college, professional and Olympic athletes as medical director of Sports Care with Promedica Health Systems. His office mantel includes

pictures of him posing with a variety of famous athletes and other dignitaries, from Olympic speed skating champion Dan Jansen to figure skaters Michelle Kwan and Tara Lipinski to former President Bill Clinton.

A 1970 graduate of Holgate High School, Kruse played baseball briefly while pursuing his undergraduate degree at Ohio State. He then earned his medical degree from Cincinnati. He did his residency at Toledo Hospital, and while there Kruse began his tenure as a team physician at the University of Toledo in 1981.

Kruse has been associated with the university ever since, moving to his current position as head team physician in 1989. In 2004 Kruse was named Ohio's physician of the year by the state's athletic trainers association.

Kruse became involved with the Olympics when he was the physician for the speed and figure skaters in Lillehammer, Norway, in 1994. He also served as a drug crew chief for the 1996 summer games in Atlanta; head physician for the 1998 U.S. team in Nagano, Japan, and medical adviser for the U.S. team in Salt Lake City in 2002.

He remains the director of sports science and camps for the U.S. Figure Skating Association and has worked with a variety of figure skaters, including Olympic medalists Nancy Kerrigan and Sarah Hughes.

Kruse also serves as program director for the Sports Care fellowship program. That program, now 15 years old, has graduated 32 physicians trained specifically in sports medicine - a group that includes team doctors at North Carolina, Ohio State, Notre Dame and Kentucky.

Kruse and his wife, Pat, have three adult children: Kylene, Greg and Chad. All three are Ohio State grads who live in Columbus.

"I ALWAYS KNEW I wanted to do sports medicine. I played sports in high school and I played a little bit in college. When I was in my third year in residency, I went over to the University of Toledo, and things began to evolve.

"I HAVE A lot of memories at Toledo. In football, I'll remember the upset at Penn State, the undefeated [1995] season with Wasean Tait ... and winning the Las Vegas Bowl was special. Basketball has been good with Bobby Nichols, Jay Eck, Larry Gipson and now Stan [Joplin]. I've learned a lot of sports from those people, and I've learned a lot about being a person, too.

"IT'S BEEN FUN to see how different coaches handle halftime. And you learn about the players - you learn who was tough. It's a bit of an art; it becomes more about your skill with people, the 'art' of medicine, than the cold, hard facts.

"THE GENESIS OF the [Sports Care] program came when I realized the family-practice residents at Toledo Hospital weren't getting good muscular-skeleton training, so we started a joint venture with the university. We called it the 'Sports Medicine Connection,' which we've since changed to Sports Care at Promedica Health Systems. Then we took it a step further, training three physicians each year. We've got people all over the United States, so it's fun when we go to meetings because it has been like watching your kids grow up. You see all these people that you helped teach, and now they're all big-time physicians somewhere. That's probably one of the things I'm most proud of.

"IT'S BEEN GOOD to [develop the teaching program] because it keeps you on the cutting edge - it makes you stay sharp. I'm not sure it would if you were just out practicing."

"TO BE A good sports-medicine physician, you have to understand athletes. You have to understand what makes them tick, and when they get hurt you have to give them a game plan on how you're going to bring them back. That's how they learn to trust you. I tell athletes, 'I would never do with you anything I wouldn't do with my own kid.' That's how I gauge things.

"WITH THE COLLEGE athlete, the parent always has to be a part of the decision. A lot of athletes say, 'I want to play, I want to play,' but when the parents come in and say, 'No, they're not playing,' well, that's your answer. The coaches at UT are very good because they don't mess with these decisions; I've never had any trouble with the UT coaches. That's what makes it fun: Having a mutual respect and a great relationship where we keep things fun.

"[TO ENTER THE Olympic program] I started with a two-week stint in Colorado Springs in 1991, and if you do well there you begin to move up the ladder. After that I did an international summer games, then the World University Games in Poland. After that I was picked to work with the figure skating and speed skating teams in Lillehammer.

"THEY TOLD ME, go to Detroit and meet your team. So the first person I met there was Nancy Kerrigan - after she got whacked. That was my introduction to figure skating. That was an incredible situation in itself. I took care of both Nancy and Tonya Harding. Nancy wouldn't get anywhere close to Tonya, which was interesting. I used to turn my credentials around so the media wouldn't know who I was. About a week into it they knew who I was, and they kept asking all these questions [about the skaters]. I became tired with it. We had Secret Service surrounding us [all the time]. It was an amazing setting.

"I ALSO REMEMBER Dan Jansen winning the gold, which still probably is the most special Olympic memory for me. He was the world record-holder in the 500 meters, but he slipped. He and I did some visualization [after the 500]. When he won the 1,000 meters, it was unbelievable. He had never won an Olympic medal, so everyone thought if he would just win a medal it would be great. But he won the gold, and it changed his life.

"AND BONNIE BLAIR was just neat; she had an incredible drive. She always thought she was going to win. She wasn't arrogant, but she was self-assured. It was fun to be around that type of athlete.

"I WAS THE head physician in Japan, so I went there three times for about five and a half weeks before the game. It was hard work; everyone said I was going there to have fun, but I was never as tired as I was after the Nagano

games.

"I'VE BEEN involved in drug testing since 1988, but I no longer drug test because I felt after the Atlanta Olympics that the athletes were already ahead of the testing, and I was kind of wasting my time. I would look at an athlete and there would be no fat, and that's not normal. I think the athletes still are three to five years ahead of the testing; we'll catch someone, and everyone else will start doing something different.

"WERE THE [PEOPLE like] McGwire and Sosa and Bonds doping? [Heck], yes. You look at Barry Bonds' body as a Pittsburgh Pirate at 25 years old, and you look at him two years ago, he's 60 pounds heavier - and it's all muscles. Your body doesn't change that much after you're 25. If you look at Mark McGwire today, he's very small compared to where he was.

"IF YOU WANTED to stop somebody [from doping], you'd have to say, 'We're going to keep your [urine] specimen, and in the future if we find anything in there, you lose all your medals.' That's the only way I can see to stop it. You look at Marion Jones and Florence Griffith Joyner, they're totally different in four years.

"I LOVE TAKING care of athletes, and I love the teaching. I'm proudest of the teaching, and I'm proud of the 25 years I've spent at the university. This has gone a lot further than I ever thought it would. It's been amazing, and as long as it remains fun, I'll keep doing it.

"FOR A FARMER from Holgate, I guess I've done OK."

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