Sports medicine surgeon keeps athletes active

By ROBERT STORACE
STAFF WRITER

BRISTOL — It’s the dream of many young boys: To work for a professional sports team, get to know the players personally and make lifelong friendships.

That dream came true for two years for Dr. Christopher Betz, a sports medicine surgeon who joined Bristol Hospital’s Multi-Specialty Group at the hospital’s Center for Orthopedic and Spine Health in early September.

A die-hard New York Yankees fan growing up in Manchester, the 35-year-old Betz got to work in 2014 and some of 2015 for the Yankees arch-rival, the Boston Red Sox. He worked with the team’s medical staff and got to know many of the team’s players.

He worked home games and also the Yankees’ minor league team in 2014 and some of 2015 for the Pawtucket Red Sox.

“It was a great experience, to meet the players, understand the game better and deal with athletes at a higher level,” Betz said. “The guys talked to you like you were one of their teammates, especially in the minor leagues.”

Today, Betz works at Bristol Hospital where he sees about 10 patients a day “an equal amount of men and women,” he said. The injuries, he said, vary “from shoulder and knee to hip.”

Today’s (Wednesday) patient was a hip. “His hip,” Betz said, is to “try and prolong the life of the joint. I’ve done about 10 surgeries so far.” The positive, he said, is that his patients want to get out there as quick as possible — whether the tennis or basketball court or the baseball diamond.

“You are dealing with people who are motivated to get well. Right now, the most common sport is soccer and ACL is the most common injury.” As the first-ever sports medicine surgeon at Bristol Hospital, Betz said he feels a special obligation to his patients.

“Sports medicine patients are extremely motivated. I have to, on many occasions, hold them back from not playing and getting that recovery time. They want to get back quick.” The time to heal varies depending on the procedure. Meniscus surgery — related to a tear in the knee — could take six weeks to totally recover from while an ACL — the tearing of a major ligament that helps stabilize the knee — could take six months and an additional three months until the patient is ready for contact activity.

Betz received his bachelor’s degree in physiology and neurobiology with a minor in neuroscience from the University of Connecticut and his Doctorate of Osteopathic Medicine at Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine in Pennsylvania. He recently sat down to discuss how sports medicine has changed over the years, among other topics.

Robert Storace: Tell us about your experience working with the Red Sox.

Dr. Christopher Betz: It was exciting. The best part of it was working with both the minor and major leagues. You can develop and form relationships with players. I worked with the team in 2014-15 and continue to do spring training with them.

Storace: What made you want to have a career in sports medicine?

Betz: I was always very interested in sports. I played a lot of sports, up until high school. My senior year in high school, I got a chronic shoulder dislocator and I also had a separation of the left shoulder.

That ended my career in basketball for the senior year. I went to an orthopedic sports medicine guy in Manchester and he had a huge influence on me. From that point on, I shadowed him both in college and medical school. I know how it felt to have that injury. He was very professional the whole time.

Storace: How has sports medicine changed — if it has — over the past decade?

Betz: The big changes are more of an interest in concussions, shoulder dislocations and a focus on having over-participation of young athletes in a single sport.

A kid that plays one sport, say baseball, plays all year round in multiple different leagues. They can get adult-type injuries.

Storace: What is the most satisfying part of your job?

Betz: It’s getting someone back to what they like to do. You are able to treat them so they get back the following year. These sports are a part of them. If they can’t play, they lost a part of themselves.

Storace: What are the most common sports injuries and how can they be prevented?

Betz: An ACL injury in the female athlete. The ways to prevent it are proper mechanics, strengthening of the hip, qua and hamstring muscles and shoulder dislocation. Recognizing it and knowing it needs to be treated, most of the time by operation, sooner as opposed to later, as it causes long-term degeneration of the shoulder.

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