

## Orthopedic Surgeon Robert Palumbo, MD '86: Treating Professionals from Athletes to Acrobats

**T**he CV of Robert Palumbo, MD '86, reads like a Who's Who of sports and entertainment illuminati:

- The Women's World Cup soccer team
- The Philadelphia Phillies
- The National Football League (NFL)
- Disney
- The Orlando Ballet
- Cirque du Soleil

Dr. Palumbo's orthopedic expertise has been valuable to some of the nation's top athletes and performers. After graduating from Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School in 1986, he embarked on a sports medicine career that was anything but conventional. As a result, he has an enhanced insight into how to evaluate, treat, and rehabilitate athletes from all walks of life.

### Early Experiences

**D**r. Palumbo, who grew up in Hagerstown, Maryland, and later moved to Edison, New Jersey, knew he wanted to become an orthopedic surgeon when he was just 13 years old.

BY LYNDA RUDOLPH

He was diagnosed with a congenital hip problem when he was 10 that became a struggle to resolve. "Sports kept me grounded," he says. "The thought of having a limp and not being able to do sports was horrifying." After some false starts at treatment, he met with a doctor who got him back to playing. It was that exposure to orthopedics that cemented Dr. Palumbo's ambition. "I knew I wanted to become an orthopedic surgeon right then and there," he says.

Dr. Palumbo wrestled, ran track, and played football in high school and was good enough to be recruited to play football for Cornell University. His own experience as an athlete gave him an understanding of both the psychology and the physiology of individuals who strive relentlessly to reach certain goals, pushing their bodies to the limit.

### Residency and Fellowship

**A**fter Dr. Palumbo graduated from Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and did his residency at Robert

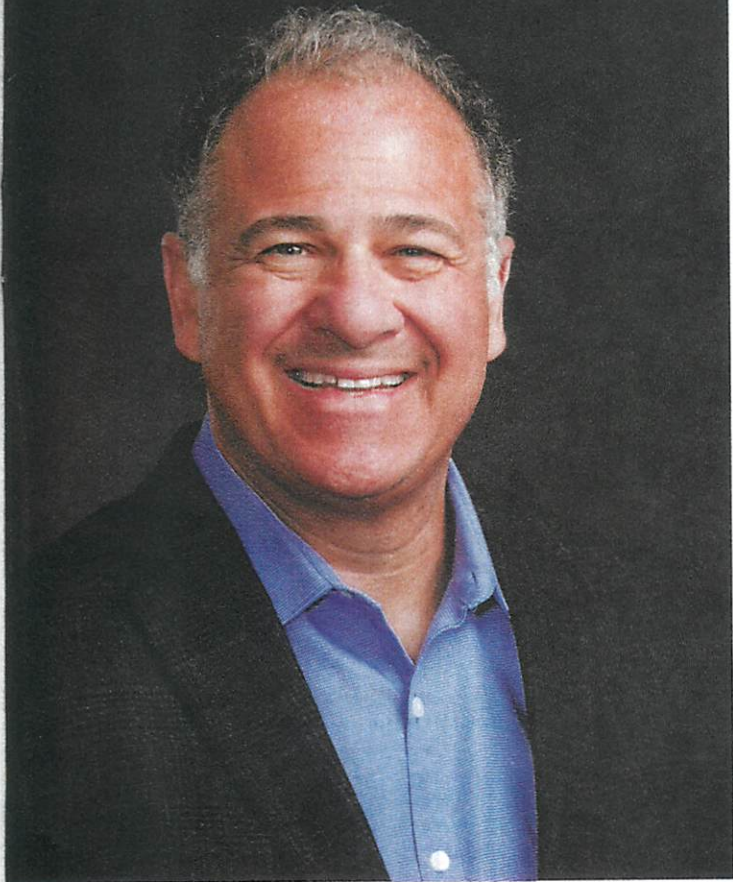
Wood Johnson University Hospital, he completed two fellowships—one in sports medicine at Union Memorial Hospital in Baltimore and a second in foot and ankle surgery at the Baylor College of Medicine Medical Center in Houston. "At the time, only a handful of people specialized in this combination," says Dr. Palumbo. Because of that niche of both foot and ankle surgery and sports medicine in general, the Orlando Ballet, Disney, and Cirque du Soleil turned to him for care.

During the same time period, he also treated some of the top golfers and tennis players in the world through a relationship with the LGE Sports Institute—one of the most elite organizations of its kind, founded by sports psychologist Jim Loehr, nutrition expert Jack Groppe, and fitness czar Pat Etcheberry.

"That combination of clinical expertise and my experience with many types of athletes gave me an ability to see things clearly through a different lens than others in my profession," he says.

### The NFL and the USWNST

**I**n his 25-year career, his experiences have run the gamut from consulting



Above: Robert Palumbo, MD '86. ■ Right, Top: Dr. Palumbo (far left) with the 2002 U.S. Women's Soccer Team in Charleston. ■ Right, middle: Dr. Palumbo (far right) with the 2004 Gold Cup Training Staff. ■ Right, bottom: Dr. Palumbo (far right) at the Home Depot Training Center during practice. ■ Left: Dr. Palumbo (left) with Brianna Scurry during the 2004 Gold Cup.

on second opinions for the NFL Players Association (NFLPA) to treating acrobats who perform hundreds of feet in the air. For 10 years—from 1997 to 2007—Dr. Palumbo served as a team physician for the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team (USWNST). As an NFLPA second-opinion physician, he responds to requests from athletes when there are gray areas in evaluations performed by team physicians.

Dr. Palumbo is one of the founding members of the medical advisory board for the Gridiron Greats Assistance Fund, which provides nonprofit financial assistance to retired NFL players in dire need. "Coach [Mike]

Ditka started this idea, but it wasn't completely organized at first," he says. "I heard him talk about it on ESPN, got connected with him, and we put together a plan on how medical advisory should work." A network of physicians agrees to review medical records and provide medical services for free. "I got to be on the ground floor of that," says Dr. Palumbo. "It has been satisfying to help those players who just have no place else to turn."

### The Philadelphia Phillies

Dr. Palumbo serves as the head physician for the minor league Lehigh Valley IronPigs and assistant

team physician for the Philadelphia Phillies. "In Triple-A, with a 40-man roster moving up and down into and out of the major league team, I end up taking care of a lot of major leaguers," he says. In spring training, he's usually present for one or two weeks over a six-week period. During the season, Dr. Palumbo covers 10 to 12 games in the majors. He also works with the Phillies' Dominican Republic Baseball Academy, recently adding about 25 players from Venezuela to get them into a safer environment. "We now have almost 100 kids at the baseball academy," Dr. Palumbo says. "It's a lot

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of work for trainers and medical staff down there, and we are communicating and collaborating often.”

**Disney and Cirque du Soleil**

**D**r. Palumbo also has taken care of performance artists. “I’m very fortunate,” he says. “Some doctors get stuck in one sport, but I have gotten a chance to work with athletes from around the world who perform.” He has learned a lot taking care of them. “To an athlete on the field, movement is a means to an end—you have to move well to perform your sport,” Dr. Palumbo observes. “But to performance artists, movement is the end.”

Many of the artists at the Orlando theme parks and those who perform at Cirque du Soleil are former X Games athletes, Olympic gymnasts, or competitive acrobats in Europe or Asia. “They are incredibly tough because of the things they have gone through,” he says. “In Russia, for example, an injury can change your status from superstar to paper mill worker.” They are on the brink of injury just about all the time because of what they do. Dr. Palumbo has learned how to get these athlete-artists back to the last 5 to 10 percent of movement or balance that is so critical to their ability to perform. That experience also has helped him treat field athletes, particularly in the critical rehabilitation phase.

**The Future**

**D**r. Palumbo enthusiastically puts two trends at the top of his list. The first is a new effort he is spearheading called U25, to raise awareness to keep body fat at less than 25 percent of body mass. “We know obesity affects

everything, including musculoskeletal,” he says. The second trend he has great interest in is the use of biologics and stem cells. “It’s still in its infancy,” Dr. Palumbo says, “but in the next five to 10 years, you’re going to see medicine change because of biologic enhancements.” He believes it’s going to be as big as the introduction of antibiotics.

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He is also founder and president of the OAA Sports Medicine Foundation, dedicated to educating sports medicine professionals and part of OAA Orthopaedic Specialists. The health campus occupies 300,000 square feet of clinical space in Allentown and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and is staffed with more than 30 physicians.

As he continues to teach and share his knowledge with others, Dr. Palumbo is helping to educate the next generation of surgeons. Although a cervical spinal cord problem has limited his ability to perform surgery, he eagerly passes along his knowledge and acumen. His legacy is even more impactful when you consider his dedication to nonprofits and big-picture health projects. They are testament to his passion for making a difference. **M**