

Teaming Up for Sports Medicine Success

CaroMont Health

When most people think of sports medicine, they picture team athletes getting their knees iced on the field, undergoing sophisticated surgery to repair injured tendons and cartilage, or undertaking grueling rehab routines to get themselves back in the game.

But the more typical sports medicine patient is the weekend warrior who's overdone his running routine or thrown a pitch to his kid with a little too much enthusiasm. Knee and shoulder injuries represent 40% of outpatient surgery volume nationally, and almost half of those patients are between the ages of 18 and 44. Clearly, a sports medicine program focused solely on team athletes won't reach most of them.

However, providing sports medicine services to youth teams, especially those in high schools and middle schools, is probably the single best way to build a reputation as the top provider of those services, both among the athletes' parents and throughout the community. The most effective programs go beyond acute care and rehab services by offering free athletic physicals, instructing school coaches on injury prevention, and sponsoring community events like running clinics or free golf-swing analysis.

"Sports medicine isn't just about young athletes," says Joe Tomaro, senior vice president for Accelero Health Partners,

which has helped many hospitals develop successful sports medicine service lines. "But it's important to get involved with the community so that parents recognize you as the sports medicine provider."

"The two orthopedic groups used to see themselves as competitors. Now they can sit in a room together and come up with a plan and work with the hospital administration. They've seen that when the water rises, all ships rise."

—Sue Miller, Accelero Health Partners
Senior Director

Stiff Competition

CaroMont Health, in Gastonia, NC, used an unexpected partnership opportunity last year to strengthen its six-year-old sports medicine service line, solidify its relationships with two orthopedic group practices, and take a giant step toward becoming the recognized community leader in treating athletic injuries.

CaroMont Health is anchored by 435-bed Gaston Memorial Hospital, the only acute care facility in town, and it has a large network of outpatient services and physician practices. With the support of Accelero Health Partners, CaroMont operates the Human Motion Institute, a program for musculoskeletal care that includes sports medicine services.

Although it's a sole provider in Gastonia, CaroMont competes with powerhouse health systems in nearby Charlotte and strives to hold its own, especially with the elective and nonurgent procedures most often found in sports injury treatment. "There are dominant ortho groups in Charlotte that would try to capture

David Huber, M.D.
CaroMont Health
Vice President of Medical Services

"The school administrators love our collaboration because they trust the rehab facility and its trainers and the hospital."



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market share from our community by being perceived as the true experts,” says David Huber, MD, vice president of medical services. (Charlotte-based orthopedic groups have a lock on caring for the area’s professional minor league baseball, basketball, football, and hockey teams.)

Gaston County has nine high schools that field teams in 12 different sports, and 11 middle schools that have teams for nine sports. Partnering with the school district would normally be an early strategic move for CaroMont in building a sports medicine service line.

But a freestanding rehabilitation center, Sports Plus Physical Therapy, had gotten there first. It had excellent relationships with both the local school district and one of the three orthopedic practices in town. Sports Plus provided training and physical therapy services to the school district and referred injuries to the orthopedic practice. The other two orthopedic practices in Gastonia were effectively cut off from serving athletes in school sports programs. And while Gaston Memorial was the most likely location for inpatient procedures on injured athletes, its sports medicine program couldn’t leverage those patient relationships in the absence of a broader association with school athletic programs.

Earlier efforts to collaborate with Sports Plus had led nowhere. But in the spring of 2008, the orthopedic practice to which the center had been referring patients disbanded, leaving a vacuum in the medical services it could offer for school athletes. The vacuum occurred at a particularly crucial moment in North Carolina following the deaths of three student athletes in 2008. Having medical care immediately available during games had become essential. “The school board welcomed the opportunity to provide a higher level of service and care for their students,” says Sue Miller, senior director of Accelerero Health Partners.

Strength Through Collaboration

While CaroMont’s first impulse was to respond to Sports Plus as a competitor, Dr. Huber quickly recognized that partnering might be a more effective strategy for everyone. “They had the relationships and had developed the trust,” he says.

Because CaroMont had its own physical rehabilitation facility, Sports Plus was skeptical of CaroMont’s motives.

But with CaroMont’s in-house facility busy with patients recovering from total joint replacements and neurological procedures, Dr. Huber felt comfortable ceding the sports injury physical therapy business to his erstwhile rival. “The community was better served by having those trainers in that trusted role,” he says.

The upshot was a four-way partnership among CaroMont, Sports Plus, and the two remaining orthopedic groups. Sports Plus provides athletic trainers, CaroMont contributes emergency and operating room services and diagnostic imaging. To ensure patients with sports injuries are handled as quickly as possible, CaroMont overhauled its emergency department and operating room procedures. In addition to surgical and medical

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care for injured athletes, the two orthopedic practices provide services such as athletic physicals and a physician on the field for each game.

The new collaboration “muddled through” the 2008 football season, Dr. Huber says, ironing out kinks and figuring out how physicians would cover the games and a “Bumps and Bruises” clinic on Saturday mornings following the football games on Friday nights. Things are going more smoothly now; in the spring, the four organizations attracted local news coverage by giving free physicals to 800 student athletes in a single morning.

It’s too soon to tell what effect the partnership will have on CaroMont’s patient volumes, although Dr. Huber expects an increase eventually as CaroMont consolidates its new relationships. Next on the to-do list is to expand from providing basic care to helping with performance optimization and to develop relationships with other athletic venues like recreation leagues, church leagues, and the YMCA.

But one solid benefit is improved physician relationships, says Accelerero’s Sue Miller. “The two orthopedic groups used to see themselves as competitors,” she says. “Now they can sit in a room together and come up with a plan and work with the hospital administration. They’ve seen that when the water rises, all ships rise.”

