

Indianapolis Colts Partnership: An Interview with Dr. Art Rettig

As head team physician of the Indianapolis Colts, Dr. Art Rettig and his colleagues at Methodist Sports Medicine / The Orthopedic Specialists have been official team physicians of the Super Bowl-winning team since the Colts moved to Indianapolis in 1984. Since then, Dr. Rettig estimates that he personally has covered 500 home and away games, missing only one game in 1987 when his mother celebrated her 90th birthday. As a lifelong sports fan, he ranks the Colts winning the Super Bowl right up there with getting married and the birth of his two sons. In 2001, Dr. Rettig was named Emageon MVP NFL Physician of the Year, and in 2003, he was named Jerry "Hawk" Rhea Outstanding NFL Team Physician of the Year. He has been secretary/treasurer of the NFL Physicians' Society since 1991.

We are the players' doctors on and off the field and we love it. We are on the field during the games to assess potential injuries and make decisions immediately about whether players are "up" or "down" and will return to play. We also see injured players in our offices between games and travel with the team to every away game.

What most people don't realize is that our responsibilities are not just on game day. This is a year-round job that starts with the NFL combine in February when we do physicals on the top 330 college players and evaluate the records of hundreds more. We're also there during mini-camp doing physicals on free agents, draft choices and veterans, and we're available during "summer school" when the team practices half days. We get a short break from mid-June until the first of August, and then we're back at it during training camp where we see lots of injuries before the season begins.

Every Monday night during the season we meet at the complex to go over injuries with the coaches, trainers and physical therapists. We make a group decision about who is ready to play in the next game and how long injured players will be out.

How do the players differ from other patients seen in the practice?

We treat players like any other patients because our goal is always to get people back to where they were before they were injured. We listen. We evaluate. We tell them honestly what we think, and we make sure they understand what it means. We strive to give everyone the best care we can.

Of course with the Indianapolis Colts, you're talking about athletes at the highest level of competition, which makes it even more challenging and interesting. But you don't have to be a professional athlete to come to our practice and benefit from our care. The fact that we treat the Colts gives many of our patients greater confidence that they'll get back to their game quickly, too.

Where are the team physicians during the game?

We're out on the field because we have to be ready to go out right away – within 30 seconds – and make a decision immediately. Usually, we're standing on the sidelines, behind the ball and the line of scrimmage. The second year we were with the Colts, I was in the wrong place at the wrong time and got a broken nose, which has never happened again. If a player needs x-rays or additional care, Tom (Klootwyk) or Gary (Misamore) will go to the locker room with him, but I'm almost always on the field. And depending on the number of injuries, sometimes I even get to watch the game.

What was it like to be at the Super Bowl after all these years?

It was wet and surreal. I remember we were down, it didn't look good and it was raining, a condition that really favored the Bears. But then with two minutes to go, Colts President Bill Polian came down and started congratulating everyone and I realized we were going to win. We truly had the better team and it showed.

After the game, we hung around a couple of hours, got our pictures taken with the trophy and then went to the post-game party with the players, staff and our families that didn't even start until 1 a.m.

It was 4 degrees in Indianapolis when we got home the next day. People lined the streets for an abbreviated parade, and there must have been 50,000 people at the RCA Dome to show their appreciation to the team.

It was amazing and has been sustained joy since then. Almost every patient has talked about how good the win was for the whole community. And it touched a lot more people than the fans. Some of my patients said, "I saw you on the field," and I know for some it was the first football game they'd watched in their lives. In fact, I heard it was the third most watched television show in history. The win has lifted everybody's spirit.

What has being head team physician meant to you personally?

As a lifelong sports fanatic, I always dreamed of being a sports medicine physician, so being head team physician has been a dream come true. To be on the field, close to the action – it's what I love to do. For me, this is as good as it gets.

Is there anything else people might find interesting?

Yes. The Indianapolis Colts are the greatest people in the world to work with. Team CEO and Owner Jim Irsay, President Bill Polian and Head Coach Tony Dungy have treated us well and are loyal to us, which means everything to me. We have a good working relationship and good communication with all of the trainers, administrators and coaches. Communication is very important in professional sports because if you try to hide something from a player or administrator, it will come back and get you. The key to our relationship with the Colts is the same as it is with all of our patients – honest communication – which is one of our strong points.