

# The Quarterly



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*Dr. Ron Kvitne of Pasadena has treated Angels, Kings, and even a bunch of MMA fighters during his more than thirty years with the Kerlan-Jobe Orthopaedic Clinic*

BY MITCH LEHMAN

The Staples Center is packed to the rafters with zealous hockey fans cheering wildly for the Los Angeles Kings, but it's hard to imagine anyone in the building more popular than the team orthopedist, Dr. Ron Kvitne. He knows and has a kind word for every single security guard, equipment manager and popcorn vendor from the time he arrives several hours before the game until he hits the on-ramp of the 110 Freeway long after the game is over.

Kvitne is quite accustomed to the role that has made him such a familiar face. Through the famed Kerlan-Jobe Orthopaedic Clinic—where he has practiced for more than 30 years—Kvitne and his associates have served as team physicians to the Los Angeles Kings, Dodgers, Angels, Lakers, Rams, and Galaxy; the Anaheim Ducks; USC; the PGA and PGA Tour Champions; UFC mixed martial arts; and the now-defunct Hollywood Park race track.

"Score two tonight," Kvitne casually says to a Kings player, who is making his way to the ice for a pre-game warm-up skate. He continues to an in-arena medical office that is located midway between the Kings locker room and that of the visiting team; tonight, it's the Minnesota Wild.

Three other doctors are stationed in the triage unit: an internist, a dentist, and a plastic surgeon (hey, hockey's a rough game) as well as a radiology technician. An X-ray machine is located at the rear of the office, just behind a fully-operational dental chair. The docs carry on like old friends, mostly because they are. A Kings player who has been looking for Kvitne hastily enters to have an injured finger numbed for the game and he quickly abides.

A Kings minor leaguer is brought to the office and Kvitne tests the stability of his injured knee. Later in the game, and as if to display his versatility, a Kings employee drops by the office with his father, who suffered a neck injury while surfing. All in a night's work, and Kvitne treats the injured dad as if he is an all-star right winger.

Two days later, Kvitne is on duty at a Sunday afternoon game of the Los Angeles Angels. He is greeted at the locker room door by Mike Trout, who is arguably the best all-around player in baseball. Pitching phenom Shohei Ohtani is getting his valuable right arm stretched by a physical therapist as Kvitne quietly makes his way to a brighter, better-decorated but less tricked-out medical office in the back of the locker room. Within seconds,

Albert Puhols, the Angels' record-setting first baseman, presents his oversized right hand to warmly greet the doctor.

The close, personal access to some of the greatest figures in professional sports would be thrilling for most fans, but is *de rigueur* for Kvitne, who has dealt in this trade for decades.

Kerlan-Jobe is actually the pioneer in the entire field of sports medicine, but it certainly wasn't planned to be that way.

Bob Kerlan grew up in Minnesota the son of a physician and came to UCLA in 1940 on a basketball scholarship until his frequent backaches were diagnosed as Ankylosing spondylitis, a chronic inflammation of the joints of the spine.

"Well, you went out there to play sports and get an education," Kvitne said, relaying the conversation between Kerlan and his father. "You can still get an education."

Kerlan continued to hang around his basketball pals while finishing his residency in orthopedic surgery. He became fast friends with Frank Jobe, who had served as a physician in the United States Army's 101st Airborne Division during World War II, including a stint in the Battle of the Bulge. The two decided to start a practice together. They frequented Dodgers games shortly after the team relocated to Los Angeles from Brooklyn and caught the eye of then-owner Peter O'Malley.

"We're just sports fans," Kerlan said to O'Malley, according to Kvitne. O'Malley asked the duo if they wanted to be involved with the Dodgers.

"It was the first instance of an orthopedic doctor or clinic being associated with a sports team," Kvitne said. "Then the Lakers. Then the Rams. The Kings and the Angels. Every time a team came to Southern California, they ended up being treated by Kerlan and Jobe."

The partnerships have produced numerous successes, but none that rivals what happened in 1974, when

a then-31-year-old Dodgers pitcher named Tommy John came in to see Jobe about a painful elbow injury.

"Dr. Jobe examined him and said, 'I don't think you are going to be able to keep playing,'" Kvitne recalled. "That's not the answer I was looking for," John reportedly replied to Jobe. "Find something."

Jobe consulted with famed Los Angeles hand surgeon Dr. Herb Stark and the two came up with the idea of ulnar collateral ligament (UCL) reconstruction, whereby the ulnar collateral ligament in the elbow is replaced with a tendon from elsewhere in the patient's body.

"They told John that the procedure had never been done before and he said, 'let's do it,'" said Kvitne, who heard the story from Jobe. "He rehabbed for a year and eventually won more games after the surgery than he had won before the surgery. Tommy John became a Hall of Famer and that pretty much changed baseball. The procedure has been modified and improved. And the rehab period has been shortened to one year instead of two. The Tommy John surgery has prolonged the careers of hundreds of baseball players."

It's also the rare instance of a procedure being named for the patient rather than the physician who performed it.

Surprisingly, Kerlan-Jobe offers the same services for the weekend warrior as the professional athlete.

"Most people would never think about calling us," Kvitne said. "Caring for high-level athletes comprises only about five to ten percent of our work. The majority involves treating people who are injured from overuse and weekend warrior collision sports, slip and falls and motor vehicle accidents. Most injuries don't need surgery, in fact probably 80 percent don't. The value is to see someone sooner rather than later. The quicker you visit a doctor, the quicker the problem can be treated and resolved. For patients who need

surgery, you want to have it done as soon as you can so the problem is corrected and you can get on with your life. We offer the same treatment for our regular patients as our professional athletes—whether or not they are Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Magic Johnson, Wayne Gretzky, Mike Trout or Shohei Ohtani."

A former hockey player himself from his boyhood days on the frozen ponds of North Dakota, Kvitne attended Central High School in Grand Forks (which is less than 100 miles from the Canadian border) before graduating in 1978 from the University of North Dakota, which is located in... Grand Forks.

He graduated from the University of California, San Francisco's School of Medicine in 1982 and completed his residency in 1987 at Northwestern University. He did his fellowship at Kerlan-Jobe in 1988 and has been a partner there ever since.

His affinity for medicine? Interesting story.

"I come from a family with a lot of electricians, mechanics and farmers," Kvitne said. "I couldn't figure out what I wanted to do and I changed my major every month. Several of my friends were in pre-med and I thought, 'if they can do it, so can I.'"

Kvitne's college counselor had an opinion on the matter when the two met in October, 1974.

"He said I shouldn't just major in pre-med, but if it was something I was serious about, I should go to work in a hospital."

One just happened to be located near campus—albeit a psychiatric hospital—where Kvitne spent the next three-and-a-half years serving as a psych technician. But it was much, much more than that.

"That helped me make up my mind that I wanted to be a doctor," Kvitne said. "I just got the feeling that helping people was the way to go."

Done with medical school and still unsure about the area of medicine in which he wanted to specialize, Kvitne "followed a friend" into ortho-



PHOTO BY MITCH LEHMAN

pedics. The fellowship that ensued at Kerlan-Jobe eliminated any questions that might have possibly remained.

"I realized that it's the only thing I want to do in my life," Kvitne said with conviction. "I fell in love."

Kvitne remembers with a particular fondness the days he treated the aforementioned Gretzky, widely acknowledged to be the greatest hockey player in the history of the sport. Kvitne even played pick-up games with The Great One at the Kings practice facility while Gretzky was rehabbing from a spinal injury in 1993.

Kvitne also treated soccer icon David Beckham while he played for the



DR. RON KvitNE, WIFE KAL AND DAUGHTER ALIKI WITH PRINCESS THE FAMILY DOG AND, OF COURSE, THE STANLEY CUP. PHOTO COURTESY OF DR. RON KvitNE

Los Angeles Galaxy and suffered ankle and knee injuries.

"Even though they were both global icons and possibly the most recognizable figures from their respective sports, they were the nicest, down-to-earth people I have ever worked with," Kvitne said of Gretzky and Beckham. "In spite of their massive popularity, not only were they humble and appreciative, they were both very good to their families. You can't say that about every athlete. It's just as easy to be nice as it is to not be nice. I respect them both as athletes and human beings."

Kerlan-Jobe now includes more than 30 physicians who specialize in just about every facet of orthopedic treatment and runs the largest training program for doctors who want to be team physicians at all levels of sports.

"That is the mission of Kerlan-Jobe," Kvitne said. "And it just sort of happened, innocently. Each time a new pro team came to town, they needed to hire a new person."

The rigors of professional sports have a price, and Kvitne rotates between the group's main facility on Howard Hughes Parkway in Los Angeles to the several hospitals where he operates and even a satellite clinic on Lake Avenue in Pasadena, not far from where he lives with his wife, Kal, daughter, Aliko, and the famous family dog, Princess.

"It can be very time-demanding," he said. "For all of our players and staff we are basically on call seven days a week, 365 days a year, any time during the season or off-season. Seeing patients and doing surgeries, it's a big time commitment. But that's the challenge everyone has—how to make the best use of our time. When you are doing what you love, you figure it out how to give quality time to your patients and your family. That is the key to having no regrets at the end of your career."

And that is precisely what makes him one of the greats, and why he, himself, has so many fans. •

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