Unlike pro football, where the team doctor rushes onto the field about once a half, a hockey team's doctor only gets attention when something really bad happens. In the case of the Nashville Predators' head physician, Dr. Michael Pagnani, that attention came when a rare blood condition sidelined the Pred's All-Star goalie, Tomas Vokoun, on the eve of this year's playoff season. Dr. Pagnani and team internist Dr. Richard Garman delivered the news with cool professionalism: Vokoun would most likely recover, but his season was over.

"I think [Tomas] has an excellent future," Dr. Pagnani says. "We're fortunate we caught this, and for now, we just have to roll with the punches. Tomas is a super guy, very straightforward, and while he's disappointed, he sees the big picture. He's got a wife and a beautiful daughter and another baby on the way, and that's the priority. The stakes are very high."

Such compassion is typical of Dr. Pagnani, an orthopedic surgeon who, in addition to his work with the Predators, has built a practice by caring for athletes of all ages, from Pop Warner tykes to weekend warriors. "The great thing about orthopedics is that it's a very positive field," he says. "We're putting things back together whereas other surgical fields are taking things away. Taking care of the teams is fun and exciting, but we're also trying to add to [people's] lives, and the patients are very grateful."

Dr. Pagnani had dreams of being a team physician early in his academic career. While playing football for his alma mater, Columbia University ("an athletic powerhouse," he jokes), his team doctor was Russell Warren, one of the best-known sports medicine specialists in the country. Dr. Warren was team physician for the New York Giants, and Dr. Pagnani, who would complete his medical degree at Vanderbilt, became his protégé. In addition to his work with the Predators, whom he's served since their inception in 1998, Dr. Pagnani has provided his expertise to the Giants, the New York Mets, the Chicago White Sox, the Pittsburgh Pirates, the Miami Dolphins, Tennessee State University, Father Ryan High School and the Nashville Kats.

"We've come so far in other areas, but the great challenge for orthopedics right now is to try to find a way to help the younger people with arthritis," Dr. Pagnani says. "Attempts are focused on trying to re-grow cartilage, and that's met with limited success. The other path that could be followed is with some sort of artificial cartilage that could be grown and implanted. Those techniques are being used now in a limited number of patients with some success."

Dr. Pagnani lives with his wife and their two children, both of whom are athletes. "Outside of medicine, I spend a lot of time watching them play sports," he says. "My passions are personal fitness and weightlifting, and I love to read history. During the summer, I also play in a men's lacrosse league. I'm no super-star," he says, "but I have almost finished The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire."

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Paul V. Griffith