



## Caring for Cowboys and Cowgirls

# Dr. Matthew Boyer's Door is Always Open

UW Athletics Medical Director invests time and technology into every student athlete

BY JOANNE MAI  
PHOTOS BY JANELLE ROSE



University of Wyoming Athletics Medical Director Matt Boyer, DO, stands outside of the High Altitude Performance Center on the university campus in October.

It's Thursday afternoon in the middle of football season. In a building a few feet from the end zone of the University of Wyoming's War Memorial Stadium, Matthew Boyer, DO, sits at his desk and looks out the window. It's not the 50-yard line of Jonah Field that he sees.

With a warm smile, he raises a hand and waves through the glass of the interior window to some football players who have just arrived at the athletic training room outside his office. They are not here to see Dr. Boyer in his professional capacity as University of Wyoming Athletics' medical director, at least not today. Instead, they greet him through his open door as though they are seeing a teammate, "Hey, Boyer!" They grab some weights off the rack along the wall and start stretching on the rubber mats that line the floor.

Dr. Boyer says he's happy with his office in the heart of the High Altitude Performance Center. From this vantage point, he sees and gets to know the more than 1,000 student athletes he's here to serve. And that's just the way he likes it.

"Before I arrived, UW was like most universities," Dr. Boyer says of his appointment in July 2015, as UW's first in-house team physician. "There was a physician who would come a couple of days a week and see athletes either before or after office hours.

"Although this provided much-needed care for the athletes, it's care that is limited to certain times of the day," Dr. Boyer continues, explaining that he is one of a handful of dedicated university sports physicians nationwide. "I am on-call 24/7 for the athletes and club teams."

### Her first major injury

Being available is important to Dr. Boyer and something the students appreciate.

About nine months ago, UW sophomore Track & Field thrower Logan DeRock tore her ACL and needed to have surgery. It was the first major injury that the former Colorado 4A high school All-Conference and All-State athlete in three sports—volleyball, lacrosse and track & field—has ever suffered.

"Dr. Boyer and his team have been very helpful in the recovery process," she says. "They have been in communication with my surgeons and have collaborated to create a plan that Dr. Boyer can adjust based on my prognosis."

She says she likes that she's been able to talk with Dr. Boyer.

"We have discussed recovery and what the year will look like for me at length," says DeRock, who throws shot put, discus, hammer, javelin and weight. "He has been a go-to for me with any questions or concerns that I have had."

Although she's had the support of her family, including her mom, who was a University of Hawaii volleyball player, and

her older brother, who also competes for UW Track & Field as a thrower, she says it's nice to have a medical professional overseeing her care.

**"It would have been hard to not have a team doctor at my side with recovery."**

"It would have been hard to not have a team doctor at my side with recovery," she says. "I think that I would have been behind or rushing into where I should be without someone who is greatly educated in their scope of practice. He has been a great addition to my athletics career."

DeRock, who says she chose to be a thrower because she wanted to have control of her successes as an athlete, has been attending practice daily, even though she can't practice yet.

"I participate in an altered version of weights and I additionally do rehab at least three days a week," she says, adding that her goal is to be cleared to compete when she reaches the 9-months post-operation mark. "I will be able to compete with the team once indoor track season starts in mid-November."

She has been using the state-of-the-art facilities at the High Altitude Performance Center to aid in her rehabilitation. "I use the pools and the Normatec (compression) boots to help with soreness," she says. "Once I start heavy lifting, I will use the altitude simulation chamber. These are great additions to recovery because they help with limiting soreness and fatigue."

### The whole person

A team of certified athletic trainers along with a registered dietitian and a wellness counselor all work on staff with Dr. Boyer and the rest of the sports medicine team to assist student athletes like DeRock. They coordinate with the dean of students and academic affairs to ensure that injured students have access to tutors and workshops to maintain their studies and coursework.

An injury or illness can take more than a physical toll. Dr. Boyer says some student athletes struggle emotionally too.

"A lot of them live with their teammates, so they watch everyone else go out to practice and they're sitting at home,"



Logan DeRock is a Track & Field athlete at the University of Wyoming. Photo courtesy of the University of Wyoming.





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he says. “They can feel like they are losing their identity when they’re not going to practice or games.”

**“This is a tough age for most people,” Dr. Boyer says. “These athletes put a lot of pressure on themselves.”**

DeRock says she’s fortunate that it hasn’t happened to her. “My teammates are super supportive with the little accomplishments, like being cleared to upper body lift,” she says. “I am very independent so the hardest part of the injury was not being able to drive or put on my socks for the first few weeks. I attended meets with my family so I still was able to support [my teammates] the best I could.”

Being a part of a team is something that Dr. Boyer understands. He played football, track and soccer.

“I injured my foot and shoulder and it ended my collegiate career,” Dr. Boyer says. “I think that experience helps when I talk with students who have career-ending injuries. If I had never been in that position, it would be a different conversation. They know when someone understands them.”

But Dr. Boyer knows that being able to relate to the students isn’t always enough. He works with UW Counseling to refer student athletes that need the help of a professional counselor—whether it’s for emotional support to get through an injury or an illness or something else.

“This is a tough age for most people,” Dr. Boyer says. “These athletes put a lot of pressure on themselves. Mental health. Eating disorders. I’ve probably seen more mental health issues here than anywhere else probably because I’m here full-time with them.”

### Building trust

In addition to attending practices and all the home games for the 17 UW varsity sports teams, Dr. Boyer tries to attend many of the UW club sport events. He also travels to every away game for football and the Mountain West championship games for men’s and women’s basketball.

That’s only part of his typical week.

He spends three full days and two half days each week in his office or in one of the two exam rooms next to it where he sees student athletes. The other two half days are spent in the university’s student health clinic where he’s available to see any student on campus, including student athletes who may want to see Dr. Boyer in a space away from their teammates.

Most people would find his schedule grueling. But not Dr. Boyer.

Spending so much time at practices and games is important, Dr. Boyer says, especially for international student athletes.

“They come from different cultures. If they only see you once in a while, they don’t trust you. But if they see you at their games and practices, and see you around, they know you’re going to be there and they develop a trust in you,” he says. “They become my adopted kids. And it’s nice that there’s someone on the sidelines for them when they’re so far from home.”

As for being in the office so much, Dr. Boyer thinks that’s important too.



The University of Wyoming expanded the Rochelle Athletic Center from 47,000 to 118,000 square feet, which includes the new High Altitude Performance Center addition.



“Live at high altitude and train low,” Dr. Mathew Boyer says. “It can help you run a little farther and faster.”

“They know I’ll be here and they can just stick their head in my office and ask a question,” he says. “And I can see them out there [through the glass] and say, ‘Hey, how’re you feeling today?’ You can see they’re not doing well. You can take care of what they need and they don’t have to wait two weeks until their next office visit.”

Developing a relationship with the athletes beyond what can be done in a clinical setting has been the most surprising aspect of the job for Boyer.

**“I see them as my kids and feel personally responsible for their well-being and success. I am heartbroken when they are sad and I am full of joy when they are successful.”**

“These athletes, these students, are around my daughter’s age,” he says. “I see them as my kids and feel personally responsible for their well-being and success. I am heartbroken when they are sad and I am full of joy when they are successful.”

Having that kind of connection to the students seems to align with Boyer’s original vision for his career.

### Compassionate care

“When I was in medical school I had a couple of different ideas of where I wanted to go with my studies,” he says. “I was interested in becoming a family physician and being a small-town doctor taking care of families and being able to have a close relationship with my patients. I also enjoyed surgery and working with my hands and the different tools. Through my rotations, I realized that I enjoyed just about everything associated with medicine and surgery which led me to emergency medicine.”

But it wasn’t just the clinical rotations that led him down that path.



Athletic trainers attend UW team workouts and practices and provide rehab and therapy to athletes after injury.

“When I was 10, my grandfather went to the hospital with chest pain and I never saw him again. He died of a heart attack” Dr. Boyer says. “As I rotated through an emergency medicine rotation, I decided I wanted to be the doctor that these patients in need of emergency services would see first and be able to provide compassionate care for them and their families.”

After completing his studies in osteopathic medicine at Oklahoma State University, Dr. Boyer went on to complete a four-year residency in emergency medicine in Oklahoma City, and then practiced emergency medicine/urgent care for seven years in Joplin, Missouri.

“The great thing about emergency medicine and urgent care is it prepares you for just about anything,” Dr. Boyer says. “I have seen all types of trauma, from sports injuries to high velocity automobile accidents. I have taken care of





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the not-so-emergent cold to meningitis and shock.”

## Finding his way to sports medicine

As a former collegiate athlete, he was drawn to helping with sporting events.

“I started covering sports events in medical school [in 1997] and this continued through internship, residency and the next 20 years,” he says. “I have covered amateur, high school, NCAA division 1 and 2, and professional-level sports. There are very few sports I have not covered.”

“Besides the college sports at UW, I have covered rodeo,

“If you find something you did for free that you enjoy doing, you should do it for your career.”

professional bull riding, professional mixed martial arts, professional boxing, triathlons and marathons,” he says. “These experiences have provided me the knowledge and skill to provide care for UW athletics and students.”

Along the way, Dr. Boyer followed the sage advice: “If you find something you did for

free that you enjoy doing, you should do it for your career.”

Dr. Boyer completed a sports medicine fellowship in 2010 at Via College of Osteopathic Medicine while working with Virginia Tech. While there, he learned a lot about concussions, which he put to use while working with the athletics programs at the University of South Dakota and University of Sioux Falls. Years later, he tapped into his network of former professors, classmates, colleagues and mentors to bolster the University of Wyoming’s concussion response program.

“When I arrived to UW [in July 2015] they did have a concussion program in place. However, it was not as robust as I felt it could be,” he says. “At that time, the university was only doing baseline concussion testing on certain sports. There was not a physician with specialized concussion training on staff to evaluate the testing or the athletes.”

Dr. Boyer thought Cowboy and Cowgirl athletes deserved more.

“We started to test all athletes in all sports for baseline concussion testing,” he says. “We have three different tests the athletes go through prior to clearing them for participation. If the athlete sustains a concussion, they have to pass all of their baseline tests, they have to be back to their same level of functioning in school and finally, they have to pass their return to play.”

But it isn’t just about testing.

“I met with the dean of students office to make sure they were aware of our concussion program and [to see if they could provide] any accommodations the athletes might need for class while recovering from the concussion. Our academic department is involved to help



The athletic center provides pools that accommodate full teams, compression suites and altitude simulation chambers.

them through the concussion. The concussion program is much more of a university-wide program now.”

And it isn’t just for varsity athletes.

“We also use the same accommodation form and similar process for our club sport athletes,” he says, which means more than 1,000 student athletes at the university can access support that will provide wrap-around care during the recovery process.

Dealing with the recent COVID-19 pandemic was a completely different process.

“There was no one with experience dealing with something like this, so I had to research different sites to come up with something based on the most current research and recommendations,” Dr. Boyer says. “I sat in my office one weekend and wrote up an eight-page document on how I thought we could best have athletes stay in Laramie, practice and compete. I worked with administration, coaches, athletic trainers, training table [a cafeteria for student athletes], our dietician and academics to try and make this happen.”

It wasn’t easy.

“We had some think our process was too strict, we had some think our process was not strict enough,” he says of the initial plan developed for when students could return to campus in the fall semester of 2020. “We had positive cases and we had to limit activity for some sports due to outbreaks. However,

we did not have to cancel any competitions due to positives at UW.”

That wasn’t the case for some of the other teams UW was scheduled to play against.

“This year has been a little different,” he says. “Our policies have been more lenient to allow for more social interaction between athletes while still trying to limit positive cases.”

He says he saw the impact of limiting the number of people student athletes could be around in the previous year. Restricting contact to just teammates helped build camaraderie but also made players feel isolated from the rest of campus.

“We kept teams away from teams,” he says. “But it made it hard to form relationships. That’s why you go to college—to make relationships.”

Ironically it may be his relationship with the student athletes that accounts for such a high COVID-19 vaccination rate amongst student athletes.

“Some teams are fully vaccinated, despite not requiring the vaccine,” he says. “The professional teams are requiring it, so many of the scouts want to know if players are vaccinated. The students come to us and ask questions. I tell them it’s my

job to give you information. Not to convince you.”

He says the student athletes know the impact that COVID can have on their athletic career.



Dr. Matthew Boyer watches a University of Wyoming football game against Ball State University from the sidelines at Jonah Field at War Memorial Stadium in September. Photo courtesy of the University of Wyoming.

## UW ATHLETICS BY THE NUMBERS

17	Number of varsity sports teams at University of Wyoming
400	Athletes compete in NCAA sanctioned sports at UW
600	Athletes participate in UW Club Sports
11	Varsity/NCAA team athletic trainers
1	Club team athletic trainer
1	Physician





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“There are a lot of strong opinions on COVID,” he says. “However, if one of my athletes or staff is positive, they are still required to be out for 10 days. Ten days during the season can be devastating to the athlete and the team.”



A total of 1,000 athletes participated in sports at the University of Wyoming. Of those, 600 participate in club sports and 400 compete in NCAA sanctioned sports.

Understanding that 10 days can have a major impact on a short sports season is just one of the reasons that Dr. Boyer is able to connect with the student athletes.

“I am able to get to know the athletes and they get to know me,” he says. “They meet me at their physical, see me at games and see me on campus. There is a trust between us. They know I have their best interest in mind. The athlete comes first. I treat the athlete as I would my own children. If I need to spend more time with an athlete, I will. They are not treated like a number to push through as fast as possible to get to the next one. I do have a schedule, but anyone can see me at any time and we will work them in either during regular hours or after hours as needed.”

### A team to care for a team

Although it may sound like Dr. Boyer does it all, he is the first to point out that he relies heavily on a team at the university and in the private medical community.

“Most of the minor injuries are seen and taken care of by our certified athletic trainers. They also are the ones who provide the therapy and rehab to our athletes after injury,” he says. “They are present at workouts and practices sometimes 12-14 hours a day and most of the time 7 days a week. They are irreplaceable and I could not do what I do without them.”

Dr. Boyer also works with mental health providers on campus and off. More recently, the university has added a

registered dietician for the athletes’ cafeteria [and to provide individual counseling for allergies and/or training needs], a wellness coordinator, and performance coaches to help keep athletes in condition to help prevent injury and succeed in sports.

“We also have a great relationship with Iverson Memorial Hospital,” he says. “We needed COVID testing last year on short notice and they were instrumental in helping us with the demand for testing. They also are more than accommodating for our athletes whether it is for labs, imaging or emergency visits.”

### Technology and recovery

Some may wonder why Dr. Boyer is so involved with the non-injury medical care of the athletes. He says it’s part of his specialty training.

“Some medications aren’t allowed for the athletes to be on or they may increase the chances of soft tissue tears or raise blood pressure,” he says. That specialty training also helped UW provide the latest in technology and equipment when it expanded the Rochelle Athletic Center from 47,000 to 118,000 square feet, which includes the new High Altitude Performance Center addition.

“Pools that accommodate full teams for recovery, compression suits and altitude simulation chambers for strength and conditioning help athletes prevent injury and help them when coming back from injury,” says UW Associate Athletics Director Tim Harkins. “Our altitude can



A team of certified athletic trainers along with a registered dietician and a wellness counselor all work on staff to assist student athletes.

be disadvantageous when you’re trying to recover from an injury. The athletes can go in the chamber and train in what feels like a lower altitude.”

Dr. Boyer says that training at lower altitude is easier on the body, especially as it recovers from injury or illness.

“Live at high altitude and train low,” he says. “It can help you run a little farther and faster.”

It’s something he knows well. Dr. Boyer grew up in Laramie before moving away at the age of 14.

“I would come back at least once a year to see my grandmother and father,” he says. “I have always been a fan of UW athletics since I was in third grade when Charles Bradley [former UW Basketball Coach] came to my class and

“Live at high altitude and train low,” he says. “It can help you run a little farther and faster.”

talked. He was bigger than life and I kept his poster on my wall for years.”

Dr. Boyer knows Laramie is a good place to raise kids, so he was grateful for the opportunity to come back.

“I have always wanted to work for a university team where I can donate all of my time to the athletes and not

have the conflict with a private practice schedule,” he says, adding that it’s really about helping the students. “I hope they know that if they need someone that you’re there. Some of them growing up didn’t ever go to doctors. Some of it is trying to convince them that they can turn to you and ask for help.”

Dr. Boyer’s door is always open.

# Thank you for leading by example.

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