



## A Team for the Teams



PHOTO CREDIT: COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING ATHLETICS

# University of Wyoming Sports Medicine

Combines advanced technology and skills to care for athletes

BY JOANNE MAI

There are slogans meant to make us all feel part of the team: The World Needs More Cowboys and Once a Cowboy, Always a Cowboy. Whether you went to the University of Wyoming or not, most people in Wyoming feel they are a cowboy. Perhaps it's the slogans. Maybe it's the fact that we have just one university in the state. Or that the UW logo is the same Steamboat logo used for anything designated as being from Wyoming. But the camaraderie felt in the UW Sports Medicine department isn't just branding. It's an actual team—a team of professionals who each bring an expertise to the table and work together to provide comprehensive care for each and every UW athlete.

It starts with Taylor Stuemky. She ensures that the team has what it needs, that it works together and that everyone stays on schedule.

Part of Stuemky's job as senior associate athletic director

for internal operations involves coordinating the holistic development and career needs of student athletes. Athletics Department academic coordinators meet with student athletes on a regular basis to help them keep up with their academic deadlines—especially when team travel overlaps with their classroom schedules. Maintaining their academic goals is not just about ensuring their eligibility to play, Stuemky says, it's about ensuring that they have what they need to make the most of their future.

In addition to tutoring, academic coordinators also work with students on developing the life skills necessary to help them balance athletics and academics, and how to manage personal finances in this age of NIL or Name Image Likeness payments. Through a program called Excellence@7220, student athletes can take tax-preparation workshops, practice for job and media interviews, and participate in community service projects like



## ATHLETE PISTOL PETE

The University of Wyoming Athletics Department cares for the health, performance, and nutrition of 400 student athletes. The Wyoming Medical Society recruited University Mascot Pistol Pete to illustrate the comprehensive program.

Mental health counseling for athletes on and off the field

Nutrition tracking for athletes who may need 6,000 calories a day

Physician physicals and screenings for health indicators

The Nordbord tests hamstring strength

The KINEXON system monitors ball acceleration, deceleration, and alignment

Student athletes wear smart watches that collect data and help monitor health indicators such as sleep quality and stress levels

PHOTO COURTESY OF UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING ATHLETICS

ILLUSTRATION BY KELLY ETZEL DOUGLAS



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Read Across America.

Student athletes get to access these services year-round, not just when their sport is in season, Stuemky says. The same is true for their access to medical and mental health services.

### Sports Medicine and Sports Performance

“It starts with a physician physical,” UW Athletics Director of Sports Medicine Dave Kerns says. “And screening for things like sickle cell.”

Sickle cell trait screening is required by the NCAA.

“UW doesn’t accept waivers because of our altitude,” Kerns explained. “If a player is trait positive, we alert coaches and trainers to provide the athlete with more frequent rest periods and to monitor them more closely.”

That physical is performed by UW Athletics Medical Director and Primary Care Physician Kurt Johnson, MD.

Dr. Johnson provides a physical and screening to about 400 athletes each year. Additionally, he attends visiting athletes who may need care due to injury, or more commonly, dehydration or altitude sickness because of Laramie’s high elevation and dry climate.

Dr. Johnson doesn’t work alone. He relies on a staff of 12 athletic trainers and partners with two physicians at Premier Bone & Joint in Laramie to treat athletes requiring orthopedic care.

The NCAA defines college sports as either contact or non-contact based on their likelihood for acute injury. Non-contact sports include tennis, swimming and golf. Contact sports, like football, basketball and wrestling, require an athletic trainer and even a physician to be present during practice and competition.

Dr. Johnson travels with the football team due to the higher likelihood of injury that those athletes face.

“It’s a true partnership,” Dr. Johnson says, explaining with multiple sports each season he cannot be at every practice and competition, so he relies on trainers to screen athletes for him.

“We have worked hard to implement a comprehensive care model,” Dr. Johnson says. “The athletic trainers are our front line.”

Kerns says “Doc is the center of it all though.”

Dr. Johnson explains that the athlete physical helps the team to identify potential problems and chronic diseases like asthma that require special care.

“Trainers manage care at practices and games,” Dr. Johnson says. “They relocate fingers and shoulders.” Elbows and knees require orthopedic care, so Dr. Johnson performs a screening and possibly some tests before making a referral.

“We establish a Return-to-Play protocol and implement a

recovery protocol,” Dr. Johnson says, explaining, “the trainers follow it to ensure that the athletes can handle the stresses demanded of them in practices and games.”

Sitting with Kerns and Dr. Johnson, the mutual respect and trust is evident. Each sees the other as central to the comprehensive care model.

“Athletic trainers really know their athletes,” Dr. Johnson says.

“We all have eyes on these athletes,” Kern adds. “We care about them and can work with them.”

Dr. Johnson, a primary care physician by training, says, “It’s nice because we can just walk over and talk with each other or we can just walk the patient over to where they need to go, and we know that they are getting that care.”

Dr. Johnson explains that when he would see patients in his primary care practice, he would counsel them to seek additional care, but he often wondered if the patient actually used the referral.

“Here, we sit down as a team and discuss the patients,” he says, explaining that he attends weekly meetings to discuss athletes who are on medications, receiving specialized care or are on return to practice or play protocols.

Additionally, he attends weekly Well-Being meetings where a team that provides wrap-around services for student athletes meet to discuss patients receiving mental health services.

“It’s a luxury being able to say to a patient that you can go see a therapist, and we can ensure that they are meeting with them,” Dr. Johnson says, adding that he is grateful for the support he receives from the university.

“We all talk to each other,” he says. “The Administration is really good at funding all of this and understanding why it’s necessary. They know that it’s hard to compete unless you look at the whole athlete.”

Kerns, who has worked in sports medicine for multiple universities over the past four decades of his career says, “You have to have the right individuals who are all willing to work together. Time away from training can be a deterrent for athletes to seek care, but we don’t want them playing on pain meds.”

Dr. Johnson, who has been at UW for the past three years, adds, “We want to hand off, integrate, their care with the recovery team so they can heal.”

Prior to joining UW, Dr. Johnson was the medical director for the Wyoming prison system.

“I’ve always gravitated toward adolescent care,” Dr. Johnson says of his experience. “They have energy, new ideas, especially college students.”

“You can make a big difference in their lives,” he says. “You become a big part of their life, not just medically but hopefully you help them mature.”

Dr. Johnson didn’t follow a traditional route to this job, and says UW is probably one of the only D1 schools with a medical director who is a primary care and not a sports medicine specialist.

“I didn’t know I would like certain things,” he says of his new role. “Covering football during games is very exciting. There’s lots of adrenaline.”

“I knew it was going to challenge me,” he adds. “The speed with which everything happens and how you have to make decision on field and be confident when there is a lot on the line, especially when looking at concussions.”

Dr. Johnson says he has learned to identify hits and collisions that might lead to a concussion, and to spot when an athlete stumbles or staggers and needs to be evaluated.

The adrenaline is similar to what he experienced when working in emergency care.

“It’s much more controlled in an ER,” he says, “There the patient is coming in voluntarily with symptoms into a medical facility where everybody knows their role. On a football field, anything can happen. On a football field, it’s always organized chaos. We have headsets on so we can communicate with each other—not on the coach’s channel—because sometimes it’s hard to find one another on the sidelines.”

Knowing the athletes is essential during that rush.

“It’s often those subtle signs that a trainer sees,” Dr. Johnson says. “They call me over and I have to not think about how it’s going to impact the game or their career but their life.”

Dr. Johnson knows he is in a special role.

“You don’t get to spend a lot of time with people in your practice,” he says. “But here, we see them with their friends, eat with them, get to know them and see them on a day-to-day level.”

Looking back on what advice he would have given himself as a primary care physician treating high school athletes, he says the most important thing to be adept at is concussion treatment, diagnosis, Return-to-Play and Return-to-School protocols.

**"College athletics are important to the fans," he says. "It's important and worthwhile to feel the excitement of cheering for the team - what it does for student athletes and the pretty impressive skills acquired here that will serve them for the rest of their lives."**

“I’m not sure if every physician has an athletic trainer that they get to work with,” he says. “If they are lucky to work with one, check in with that trainer on a daily basis, and if you don’t have one, become adept at SCAT6 concussion protocols that have Return-to-Play guidelines tailored to sport.”

“It’s essential to be looking for symptoms rebounding or flaring,” he says. “We have to take it seriously because the brain has to be 100 percent healed; it makes them much less likely to have permanent issues.”

Advice Dr. Johnson would offer other physicians: “Keep looking for concussion and not be pressured when you diagnose a concussion because they are a star athlete.”

Kerns adds how important it is to follow the Return-to-Play-protocol and to follow your instincts.

“Athletes have a great sense of ‘I can do it,’” he says. “They sprain an ankle and think they can play again tomorrow.”

Kerns uses the data from the student physical as a baseline when working with athletes.

“It’s important to do a baseline concussion test during the intake physical because I can pull that baseline up on my phone, do a quick test and compare if it’s say 10 percent of baseline,” he says. “You can’t fake that.”

He says it’s important to make the tough calls.

“College athletics are important to the fans,” he says. “It’s important and worthwhile to feel the excitement of cheering for the team—what it does for student athletes and the pretty impressive skills acquired here that will serve them for the rest of their lives.”

The ‘rest of their lives’ is what UW’s comprehensive care model focuses on.

## Sports Nutrition

“If they are not eating enough for the exercise they are doing, it will impact their careers and their life,” UW Athletics Director of Performance Dietetics Kevin Goff says. “We rely on the intake physical to give us a baseline.”

Goff, and UW Athletics Assistant Director of Performance Dietetics Amanda Koss look at the data frequently.

“It’s easy to figure out who has a nutrition problem,” he says. “If they’re performing at 75 percent instead of 100 percent but they are not out of breath, that’s a fueling problem.”



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Goff and Koss try to be at as many practices and training sessions as possible to help them develop relationships with the players.

“A lot of them see us as the food police,” he says of athletes who often need upwards of 6,000 calories per day to maintain their performance. “Once they’re eating enough, we’ll talk with them about choices.”

### What is the Training Table?

Dietitians and chefs work together to plan menus that meet the dietary and caloric needs for the high-performing population they serve in a cafeteria for student athletes with meals designed to fuel for performance. “UW Athletics has one of the only Training Tables in the conference,” Stuemky said. “There are few fried foods and desserts available. Instead, there are several protein options and other foods that provide optimum performance.” In addition to the Training Table cafeteria, there is a Fueling Station that looks like a gas station convenience store, but provides pre- and post-workout snacks and grab-and-go recovery shakes for student athletes rushing to and from class.

The Sports Nutrition team looks at spreadsheet data collected daily.

“If we see they aren’t eating enough,” he says, “we can hand them a smoothie with 1,000 calories as a stop gap until we can find out what the problem is.”

Sometimes it’s the drive to maintain a certain weight, but other times it’s as simple as finding the time to balance eating with a demanding academic schedule or the cost of food.

“We look for patterns,” he says. “If we see that they are stuffing their pockets with snack bars, we pull them aside for a talk.”

Student athletes have a separate dining room called the Training Table and a spot just outside the training and locker rooms that looks like a gas station convenience store called the Fueling Station. Here, students can access free grab-and-go snacks for pre- and post-workout energy.

“You won’t see Doritos in here,” Goff says, explaining that there is careful consideration to the offerings in both locations. “If it’s a bad eating day, they are not going to be 100 percent, and they will never have their best day in the weight room or in a game if their body isn’t fueled.”

Koss explains that nutrition is behavioral.

“We utilize dietitians, especially when there’s a concern,” she says. “We help athletes build good habits—not only for their time in sports because they’re not going to be an athlete forever, but for how they are going to use nutrition information when they’re no longer an athlete.”

Koss and Goff are working with UW Cooperative Extensions to put together online courses for high school athletes, coaches and physicians to help them learn about sports-specific nutrition so athletes can adopt good behaviors early.

“Health starts with nutrition,” Goff says. “What you put into your body matters.”

Once athletes are properly fueled, they can focus on strength training.

“We are doing our best to meet the athlete where they are at by collecting data on a daily basis,” UW Athletics Director of Sports Performance, Olympic Sports, Mike Cotterman. “We look at the hours and quality of their sleep, stress levels when balancing their athletic and academic lives, and the mood of the athlete.”

Student athletes wear smart watches and data trackers that collect data and help monitor health indicators.

“Not every team uses this,” Cotterman says of the KINEXON system installed in the strength training room. “It helps them prepare for the intensity they may face by measuring the acceleration and deceleration as well as their alignment.”

Data from the system helps the coaches and the trainers design the best workout for each athlete.

### Student Athlete Well-Being

“You can get a great night’s sleep, but if you’re not mentally there, it will impact performance,” Cotterman says. “If they’re dragging, we reach out to them and try to determine if it’s physical or mental.”

When it appears to be the latter, Cotterman refers the athlete to the Well-Being Team.

Former UW football player and licensed mental health provider, Tedder Easton, is the Director of Student-Athlete Well-Being.

He and Student-Athlete Well-Being Assistant Director Chrislyn Cool, a recent UW graduate, welcome student athletes into a space devoid of brown and gold where athletes can disconnect from being an athlete 24/7, says Easton.

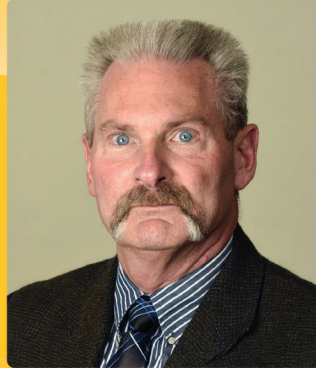
“There’s a lot of pressure they are feeling,” he says, adding that he wishes there was a place like this when he was a player at the school. “There were definitely moments of anxiety and self-doubt and it would have been nice to have someone to talk to about it.”

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Assistant Director of  
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Although Easton and Cool provide one-on-one counseling services, it's not the only services they offer.

"We teach them to tap into their emotions to give them an edge with their performance," Easton says. "Some athletes perform better when calm and some when they're more hyped up. We work with them to find their zone of optimal performance."

Easton and Cool provide workshops for teams to learn restorative yoga, meditation and deep breathing skills, as well as ways to help the team deepen their bond and trust with one another.

Although it's not in the job description, Easton and Cool often go to practices and games to let athletes know they care.

"We think it's important for them to know we're there for them," Easton says. "Sometimes we even check on athletes in the locker room when they tell us that helps."

### What are some typical mental health issues Well-Being sees?

- PTSD
- Depression
- Sleep issues
- Eating disorders
- Adjusting to college/new state/new environment
- Relationships—romantic/friendships/athlete-coach/professors
- Confidence issues which lead to strength-based counseling
- Differentiating from family and becoming their own person
- Career counseling
- Identity exploration
- Grief and loss
- Executive functioning
- Time management

QR codes to set up appointments or make referrals are located throughout all Athletics facilities. There is no cap on the number of sessions a student can use.

Students don't need to make an appointment to see Easton or Cool. They can drop in to talk or nap on the couch or use any of the yoga mats, calm bands or other well-being materials on the shelves. Easton and Cool continue to add items they think students will find useful. Last fall, they even brought in therapy goats.

"Well-being is a huge piece," UW Athletics Director of Sports Performance, Football, Eric Donoval says. "We're seeing an increased level of need with the more exposure to the public with social media and media coverage—these are still kids, 18-, 19-, 20-year olds who need tools to help them cope."

Although social media and press coverage can be positive, it's not always the case.

"They are exposed to the most criticism we've ever seen," Donoval says. "Anytime money is involved, there's an expectation that comes along with it and pressures that come along with it."

In addition to the importance of the athlete's well-being, Donoval sees his sports performance staff as being part of a 3-legged stool that works with the health and nutrition teams to ensure the physical needs of each athlete.

"All we do is break their bodies down, we need to work together to build them back up," he says. "Technology helps to objectify the program. It helps us audit what we do."

Donoval, like the rest of the UW care team, relies on the data from the baseline physical as well as the health trackers athletes use on a daily basis to determine each player's needs.

"When I got into this, I didn't think I would spend time behind a desk looking at a computer screen," Donoval says. "When I started 17 years ago, we would stand next to an athlete while they lifted weights and tell them to lift more."

Donoval says that when he was working with LSU's football team, they didn't have sports nutritionists.

"In 2010, we were bagging fruit and doing our best to take care of it," he says. "Now technology is the side that has really advanced and validated what we do."

Data, including results from the Nordbord, which is a force-plate technology, provides Donoval with more than 8,000 points of athlete performance indicators per day for the football team helps inform his work.

He spent the last three years teaching himself Excel.

"You have to be careful not to have paralysis by analysis," he says. "It's such a fine line: you don't want to live and die by the data but you don't want to ignore it."

He says being able to have the data and work with the other members of the comprehensive care team helps everyone focus on what the athlete needs.

"These students have a strong identity with their sport," he says. "There is a lot of mental anguish when they can't play it or aren't playing their best. To give them this data and a plan for how we're going to work together to use it hopefully that helps them get over their mental block that they think it's just them so that they can get back on the field and be their best." 