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Injured athletes find help in Bill Kauth's healing hands

Looking after the health of varsity sports participants involves both physical and emotional support.

By Brandon Christol '04



Kauth, above, uses ultrasound to treat Robert Inzinga '07, who pitches for the Titan baseball team. At any given time, Kauth and his staff regularly treat 40 to 50 athletes for a range of injuries. *(Photo by Marc Featherly)*

When word got out that junior Cory Jones, starting center for the IWU men's basketball team, would be out due to injury as the 2004-05 season began, many fans whispered that the success of this year's squad may very well depend on how quickly Jones could rehabilitate his right foot.

What may not have been immediately obvious to those fans was the critical role that another member of the Illinois Wesleyan community would play in getting Jones back onto the court. That challenge fell to head athletic trainer Bill Kauth.

From 4 until 5:30 or 6 p.m. each day, as the team practiced, Kauth worked with Jones on drills designed to heal his fifth metatarsal, the bone that runs from the

midfoot to the base of the small toe. After returning to action but then reinjuring his foot, Jones had a screw inserted and returned to Kauth for more rehabilitation.

Jones says he appreciates Kauth's bedside manner as much as his medical expertise. "If I told him something was bothering me, he was always understanding. He helped a lot in the emotional aspect of the recovery. He genuinely cared about me getting back (to playing). As opposed to someone saying 'It's up to you,' he took the initiative and told me what I needed to do."

By late January, Kauth had helped Jones nearly complete his road to recovery, as he returned to game action against North Park and in February he was reenlisted as a starting player for the team.

For Kauth, two hours each day over the last couple of months have been spent with one of the key players on a team that regularly draws over 2,000 fans to its home games and is ranked as one of the nation's top NCAA Division III teams. But in the bigger picture of Kauth's job as IWU's first ever head trainer, Jones is just one of 382 varsity athletes — or 18 percent of the student population — for whom he is responsible. Also, Kauth is usually the first one contacted when an intramural athlete breaks a bone, pulls a muscle, or sprains a ligament.

Oh, and he's always willing to help a faculty or staff member nurse a minor injury as well.

"Bill is indispensable," says IWU Athletic Director Dennie Bridges '61. "He has an effect on every team, from the time we prepare a kid to play to making sure that we have coverage for all our events in case of injury. If you wonder whether our resources are being well spent, go in (the training room) in the fall during peak season and you'll see."

Step into the training room at 2 o'clock in the afternoon and you might think Kauth's job is a breeze. Come back at three that same day, or 10 the next morning, or during football season, and you might feel a breeze from the bike-riding, ball-bouncing, leg-kicking, shoulder-rotating, injury-discussing athletes swarming Kauth and his staff.

Walk in at 3:10 p.m. and you'll see swimmer Kristi Gallagher '08 rehabbing her knee, golfer Abby Patten '08 doing shoulder exercises nearby, women's basketball player Kerri Gravlin '08 rehabbing her ACL, several athletes warming up in the whirlpool in back, two football players lying on adjacent training tables, one working his knee, the other his back, and Kauth using an ultrasound on another athlete's back to warm and loosen her muscles.

At any given time, Kauth says, about 40 or 50 athletes will be receiving some sort of regular rehab.

And yet, only a portion of Kauth's work is done here in the training room.

The oversized calendar on the glass wall of Kauth's office reveals the many athletic events for the month of February: track meets, men's and women's basketball games, men's and women's swimming meets, and more. Also, a member of the training staff must be present at every practice for every team. Plus, Kauth teaches one class each semester, rotating among kinesiology, exercise physiology, athletic training, and essentials of strength and conditioning.

Fortunately, Kauth has some help in the form of two assistants who are graduate students in the athletic training program at Illinois State University, from which Kauth himself earned his bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees. While Kauth covers basketball, baseball, and football games and practices, Brandon Mueller and Nancy McCriskin cover the other sports. There are also four Illinois State undergraduate students who assist in the office.

Despite the six additional staff members, the training department may be lacking in personnel. While Kauth says he has all the technology and resources needed, the number of full-time trainers on staff — one — is relatively low compared to other schools in the College Conference of Illinois and Wisconsin (CCIW) to which Illinois Wesleyan belongs. According to a study conducted last year by Augustana College's head trainer Rochel Rittgers, IWU is the only CCIW school with fewer than two full-time trainers. North Park University, for example, with around 350 varsity athletes, has three full-time trainers and one full-time intern.

Bridges says that hiring another trainer is one of his "highest priorities."

As it is, Kauth — who is in his eleventh year on the job at Illinois Wesleyan — generally works from about 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., five days a week, in addition to the games he often covers on weekends. Football season is even busier: for those three months, Kauth says he works about 90 hours a week without any days off.

“Every once in a while during those 90-hour weeks, I think it’d be nice to have an 8-5 job and go home and see my family,” says Kauth, who has three sons and a daughter with his wife Marjorie. “I love this so much, though. I can’t see myself doing anything else.”

And that includes working for NCAA Division I schools or professional sports teams.

“When I first started I aspired to be D-I, but not any more,” Kauth says. “It’s the same job either way, it’s the same injuries. In D-I, there’s more pressure to get the athletes back; more political types of things going on. I like the small-college atmosphere.”

While the injuries are the same, the relationships with coaches probably vary between D-I and D-III, Kauth observes.

“All coaches want their athletes to play,” Kauth says, “but you don’t have scholarships to deal with at D-III, so there’s not that pressure. At D-I you have more public eyes on you.”

Still, the eagerness to get athletes back in action is endemic among coaches at all levels, and Kauth says that creates inevitable conflicts.

“I’m the person the coaches come to when there’s a question as to whether an athlete can play, and that’s a lot of pressure,” Kauth says. “Sometimes the coach wants them back, and I know that they’re not ready to go back. I have confrontations quite often with coaches about that issue.”

Bridges — having led the Titan men’s basketball team to 17 CCIW championships, three trips to the D-III final four, and one national championship as head coach from 1965 to 2001 — realizes the importance of the give and take between Kauth and the coaches and is confident in Kauth’s ability to manage those delicate issues.

“Those discussions never get to the point where it’s contentious because that’s what he’s hired for,” Bridges says. “The trainer is our conscience, and he’s someone you have to trust. He has to have a good balance between not being overprotective but being sure to be properly protective. It’s medical and it’s common sense. He has both.”



Kauth and father Bill Kauth Sr. watch the action at a Titan men’s basketball home game. Kauth’s father, a retired athletic trainer at Illinois State University, often lends his expertise at the men’s games. *(Photo by Marc Featherly)*

The coaches also realize that while it may be frustrating to have an athlete out of action due to injury, there's no question that life without Kauth would be considerably more difficult than life with him.

"I think Bill does a great job," says Scott Trost, head coach of the IWU men's basketball team. "He's organized, and he really knows how to administer that office. Making sure all the teams are covered with proper staffing takes a lot of work, and Bill is approachable, hard-working, and has the best interests of the athletes in all that he does."

Despite its importance, Kauth's position and the many responsibilities that accompany it often go unnoticed by the many fans of Illinois Wesleyan's 18 athletic teams. While the hard work of the athletes and coaches cannot be downplayed when discussing the fact that 17 of those 18 teams have been nationally ranked within the last three years, neither can the role of Kauth as he and his staff administer health care from behind the green and white curtain of IWU's athletic program.

"I think most of the success is from the coaches and the athletes," Kauth says as he takes a short break during one of his typically hectic days. "I wouldn't say we're a big part of it. We're here to help the teams and do what we can." For the athletes awaiting his healing attention, that help won't come a moment too soon.