

He keeps the players playing

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By Kay Lazar

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Dr. Thomas Gill is the medical director of the Red Sox and the head physician for the Patriots, and a fan. "I have to disengage everything except the medical side," he says. (Wendy Maeda/Globe Staff)

Dr. Thomas Gill may be a Boston transplant, but the chief of sports medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital understands New England's sports-obsessed psyche. Gill grew up in Pittsburgh, where he says a "clinical depression" would set in whenever the Steelers lost. Now, as medical director of the Boston Red Sox and head team physician for the New England Patriots, Gill determines which players are medically cleared to suit up - and that, in turn, has a big effect on the collective sanity of New England fans. Here's an edited version of a recent conversation with him.

Q. What's the best part of being a team physician?

A. The Red Sox give me enormous amounts of latitude to pick the training staff, which is unheard of around the league. It's not often, when you are a team physician, that an organization says, "You have one job to deliver - the best care possible, and tell us what you need to make that happen." That's sweet.

[In treating Patriots] it's like snowflakes, every injury is different. When an injury occurs, there is no imaging; all you have is your hands, and talking with the player, to figure out what's wrong. Everything has to happen in real time. That's a completely different job than being in the office. It's a challenge like no other.

Q. Your judgment on whether a player is healed has enormous ramifications throughout Red Sox and Patriots nations. How nerve-wracking is that?

A. I never let being a fan get in the way. I have to disengage everything except the medical side of it. I say when a person is medically cleared. The simple answer is: I don't let [other considerations] influence things. I treat all my athletes like a regular patient.

Q. You must be popular among ticket-seeking colleagues?

A. My friends call me Ticketmaster. Everyone is always coming at me. Even patients hit me up. Sometimes I think I spend as much time brokering tickets as taking care of patients.

Q. So where are your seats at Fenway?

A. Right behind the dugout, but I try to give them to my nurses or consultants for the team. I spend a lot of time in the clubhouse getting caught up on my other work. Isn't that pathetic? I love Fenway, but there are only so many hours in the day.

Q. What's the most unusual situation you've encountered as a team physician?

A. You take care of not only the players but often their families, their friends, their girlfriends. Lots of unusual things.