

## THE PICTURE OF SUCCESS

### Dr. William Mallon

By Elizabeth Hofheinz, M.P.H., M.Ed

When Bill Mallon walked off the PGA Tour in 1979, it was with a heavy heart...he was indeed heading into an uncertain future. In time, he would become Dr. Mallon, a specialist in complex shoulder reconstructions and the esteemed Editor-In-Chief of the *Journal of Shoulder and Elbow Surgery*. Dr. Mallon, who was awarded the Olympic Order in 2001 for his service to the Olympic Games, credits his success to his intense focus and to the fact that he always finds some good in any situation or person.

Those of us raised by parents who endured the Great Depression *do* learn



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focus...and the focus is on education. Growing up in Framingham, Massachusetts, Bill Mallon would become the second person in his family to attend college. And he would do it via his first love—golf. Dr. Mallon: “I vividly remember the day that I knew my path was set. I was 14, and had just hit my 400th ball of the day when I thought, ‘This is not going to make me great. But if I do this every day I will be great.’ I ended up attending Duke University on a golf scholarship. I joined the PGA Tour in 1975 and in my five years there gained some tough life lessons.”

One of those lessons was driven home with every drive. “Focus is everything, both in golf and surgery,” says Dr. Mallon. “If you make a bogey you must forget about it in order to have a solid chance at the next hole. When you’re having a problem in surgery, you have to correct it and move on. It can be difficult to put aside your emotions, but if you don’t then it is to the patient’s detriment. Also, I always tell residents and fellows that if they are feeling rushed or worried, then there will be a natural tendency to speed up. But, I tell them, this is the time to slow down because then you are less likely to make a mistake and further complicate the situation.”

So how did someone with “zero” interest in medicine become such a sage of the orthopedic field? Dr. Mallon explains, “I injured my shoulder while playing golf



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in the ‘70s, something that necessitated surgery. I continued on the PGA Tour, but then started to struggle...I could see that I had to find another calling. My interest in medicine was piqued by the surgeon who had treated my shoulder. It was also appealing that I could actually make a living at medicine—I had made almost nothing as a professional golfer in my last two years.”

Despite seeing a way forward, leaving behind the clubs and the Leaderboard would be anything but easy for Bill Mallon. “I had been a math and physics major, but I had to do additional coursework to get into medical school. All during this planning process my heart was churning...my childhood dream was gone. I recall sitting in a laundromat crying my eyes out because I realized that my life as a professional golfer was over. It was also surreal when a few months later someone said to me, ‘Didn’t you used to be Bill Mallon?’”

“One door closes,” Dr. Mallon is fond of saying, “and another one opens.” The doors of medical school opened easily for him. “I got into Duke University School of Medicine on my first try, probably because of my unusual story. I

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was concerned because I lacked a premed background; I studied so hard that my friends said, ‘Bill, you’re overdoing it.’”

As hard work usually does, however, Dr. Mallon’s dedication paid off. He would go on to become the first fellowship trained shoulder specialist in North Carolina. “I matched in ophthalmology at Michigan, but also did an orthopedics rotation and really enjoyed the tie-in with sports. Time was running out, but I went to the Chief of Orthopedics at Duke and, because someone had dropped out of the match, I was given his residency spot. I remember talking to an attending about my becoming a shoulder specialist. He said, ‘You can’t do that. There are only three or four guys in the country who do that.’”

But you don’t become a winning golfer—or surgeon—by giving up easily. Dr. Mallon: “I went to a couple of meetings and talked to other surgeons, who were encouraging. I drew upon my natural interest in the shoulder (given my past injury), and found it to be an unusual joint that few people understood.”

Surviving the Duke residency, Dr. Mallon then encountered a fresh breath of Canadian air. “I did my fellowship with the outstanding Dr. Richard Hawkins at the University of Western Ontario. I was accustomed to being one of the ‘Duke Marines’ because of the intensity of the experience. Dr. Hawkins sat me down and said, ‘Bill, the most important thing is to have a

good time.’ I relaxed, learned an enormous amount about shoulder surgery, and developed an extraordinary fondness for Dr. Hawkins.”

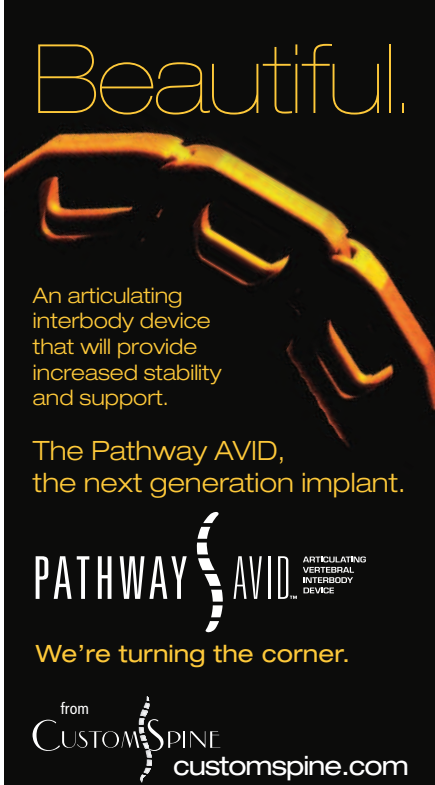
Reflecting on what has surprised him over the years, Dr. Mallon states, “I was so naïve that I thought that after graduating from medical school that I would be a full-fledged doctor. I remember telling someone, ‘Really? I’ve gotta do another five years?’ I was undeterred, however, and pressed on.”

An unqualified success, Dr. Mallon has worked at it...not only on the intellectual side of things, but on the attitudinal aspects as well. “My last two years on the PGA Tour were especially difficult. In that world your value is determined by your pecking order; if you’re not making the cut other players won’t even practice with you. I often drew up the wisdom of luminaries such as Vince Lombardi, who said, ‘...But I firmly believe that any man’s finest hour—his greatest fulfillment to all he holds dear—is that moment when he has worked his heart out in a good cause and lies exhausted on the field of battle, victorious.’”

In the hours that are his less-than-finest, Dr. Mallon can walk down the hall and look at a photo of his treasured mentor. “Bill Strausbaugh, a golf instructor, became my mentor during my PGA years. Whenever I have a bad day I remember some of the things he taught me. One of the most valuable

lessons was that people do much better when you tell them what they are doing well instead of always pointing out their mistakes.”

This focus on the positive has served Dr. Mallon well in the professional realm. Now Editor-In-Chief of the Journal of Shoulder and Elbow Surgery, Dr. Mallon says, “In 2004 I was asked to become an Associate Editor. In 2007 when Dr. Bob Neviasser stepped down, I was selected to be the next Editor-in-Chief. I think that I was chosen in part because I have never been a hypercriti-



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cal reviewer, and I try to find something good in nearly any manuscript.”

“Welcome aboard...now, to your first set of problems.” Dr. Mallon recalls, “One editor was angry because we rejected a paper that he had approved. Also, we had accepted an article with one of the authors saying he had no conflicts of interest, when in fact there were significant conflicts. Fortunately, I’m finding that the quality of research is improving, actually to the extent that it is increasingly difficult to reject papers.”

When not giving positive feedback to researchers, Dr. Mallon is performing surgeries that others turn away. “Many of the surgeries I do are in the subspecialty realm; I am a final referral point in North Carolina for complex revision shoulder replacements and rotator cuff repairs. The most exciting thing is that I help make a lot of people feel better.”

And just like any thoughtful physician, Dr. Mallon knows there is more to learn. “Because it is difficult to know who to operate on and when, I think I can learn more in the patient selection arena. I am better at it than in the past, but it takes years to learn, and involves much more than reading MRIs and X-rays.”

As for what ‘Shoulder and Elbow’ needs to learn, Dr. Mallon says that there are some ‘play nice in the sandbox’ issues arising. “The hand surgeons say, ‘The shoulder doesn’t do anything.’ The shoulder surgeons say, ‘If the shoulder isn’t working then the

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hand won't cooperate.' Increasingly, hand surgeons want to do elbows; also, some hand fellowships are now billing themselves as 'hand and upper extremity.' This means they include shoulder as well. These things will have to be sorted out as we go forward.”

In working on these and other issues in the field, perhaps Dr. Mallon can draw upon his knowledge of history. Dr. Mallon, who has written 24 books on the history of the Olympic Games, states, “I have always been fascinated and inspired by those athletes who have reached the pinnacle of athletic competition. Studying the history of the Olympics has been a hobby that

has become more than that, but in some ways is my release valve, and keeps me sane.”

But even if the day brings problems that he cannot solve, Dr. Mallon can rest assured that there are those at home who accept him nonetheless. “My wife was a flight attendant and was generous enough to put me through medical school. We have five gregarious dogs who greet me at the door every day and whether or not I've had a good or bad day, they are always their wonderful selves.”

Dr. Bill Mallon...focused on the moment, and reaching for the best. ♦