

PLAY BALL!

U-M MEDICAL SCHOOL ALUMNI ROBERT MURRAY AND DANIEL GOODMAN HELP MAKE SURE THE GAME GOES ON FOR THE SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS

by Gary Libman

Photo: David Paul Morris



Robert Murray and Daniel Goodman at SBC Park, home of the San Francisco Giants

During a game a few years ago in San Francisco, Giants first baseman J.T. Snow whipped a throw that second baseman Jeff Kent deflected before it banged shortstop Ramon Martinez in the head.

The stunned Martinez left the night game at SBC Park and the Giants immediately reached the team's head physician, Robert E. Murray (M.D. 1962), at home around 10 p.m. Murray quickly called St. Francis Memorial Hospital in San Francisco, alerting the staff to call in a

radiology team to perform a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) test. An ambulance sped Martinez to the hospital, where doctors diagnosed a concussion and called Murray with the information. Murray relayed the news to the Giants within hours of the injury.

Kent now plays for Los Angeles and Martinez for Detroit, but Murray's job remains the same. In his seventh year as the Giants' head physician, he coordinates treatment of players, their families, team executives and administrators.

In recent years Murray supervised ace pitcher Jason Schmidt's treatment for rotator cuff tendonitis, first baseman J.T. Snow's arthroscopic knee surgery and former closer Robb Nen's four shoulder operations. In every situation, he says, it's crucial to begin treatment quickly.

"We're very proactive," says Murray, who also maintains a full practice as a general, vascular and thoracic surgeon. "If we suspect anything is wrong, we'll get an MRI or treat the condition

immediately. We try not to allow any delay between a perceived injury and the treatment.

“That’s important because the faster the player starts rehabilitation, the quicker he will heal. Also, if someone goes down with an injury we have to move players from the AAA team to the majors, and we try not to create any delay in that process.” In addition to players, Murray’s patients with the Giants include baseball Hall of Fame members Willie Mays, Willie McCovey and Orlando Cepeda, who work for the team.

Murray’s work with the Giants extends far beyond the 162-game season. It can involve 11 months of the year. “We go from December 1 through the end of October if we’re in play-offs,” he says. “If not, our work ends October 1. Truly, the only time off is in November.” The work starts again in December with a training camp for players and winter meetings for executives that doctors attend for continuing medical education.

Doctors helping Murray on the Giants staff include orthopaedists and an internist, podiatrist and ophthalmologist.

The ophthalmologist, Daniel Goodman (M.D. 1980), also received his medical degree from Michigan, and was a Phi Beta Kappa Wolverine undergraduate. Team owner Peter A. Magowan invited Goodman to join the staff after becoming Goodman’s patient.

Goodman specializes in corneal transplant, cataract and lens implant surgeries and laser vision correction. The former Chicago high school third baseman sees fewer games than Murray, and most players needing treatment come to his office.

In recent years, Goodman has performed LASIK (laser vision correction) surgery to correct contact lens problems for former Giants shortstop Rich Aurilia, who signed a minor league contract with Cincinnati during the off-season, and Robb Nen, now retired. Nen “had extremely high near-sightedness and was having difficulty with contact lenses, especially at night – to the point where he was having a hard time seeing the catcher’s signals,” Goodman says. Each player’s vision was better than 20-20 after surgery.

The team medical staff is necessary because “although these men are all under the age of 41, the wear and tear of a 162-game season carries a price,” Murray says. “They all sooner or later start breaking down a little.”

Because he deals with healthy young men, Murray says, “we are just treating colds, allergies and gastrointestinal disorders. ... Several guys have had acute appendicitis, but most of the major problems are dealt with by the orthopaedists.” The staff’s treatment of these problems has helped the Giants register “one of the lowest number of disability days in major league baseball,” Murray says. “That’s been consistent over the last six years.”

To ensure that the Giants get proper care, Murray spends weekends in spring training in Scottsdale, Arizona, and attends about 50 of the team’s 81 home games. He arrives about an hour before the first pitch and heads for the training room in the clubhouse to see players.

When the game starts he watches from his seats behind home plate. After the game he waits in the trainers’ room, in case he’s

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needed, until the players leave. Murray also traveled with the Giants to the 2002 playoffs and World Series, where San Francisco lost to Anaheim in seven games. Being at the World Series tops his baseball thrills. “It’s extremely exciting,” he says. “You’re on the inside and you know everything that’s happening.

“You are at another level of competition, so your day-to-day activities with the team are greatly accelerated. In a real sense you are living in the moment. You are not thinking about tomorrow or the next day because everything is so much more intense.”

Events like the Series make him appreciate the job. When he became director of the Catholic Healthcare West Sports Medicine Team, the organization asked if he’d also direct health services for the Giants. “I jumped at the job,” Murray says.

Murray reacted quickly because he grew up a baseball fan in Muskegon, Michigan, and rooted for the Detroit Tigers. “We just mowed down a field across from our house and built our own playing field for the summer,” he says. “Playing was one of our major enjoyments. Money was tight and it occupied our time.” He also played American Legion, high school and semi-pro baseball.

Murray’s father was a mechanical engineer but his mother, a housewife, influenced his career choice. “My uncle was a doctor,” he says, “and my mother was a strong influence that I be a doctor. ... I was not bothered by career choices.” He completed undergraduate and medical school at Michigan in seven years.

“I had a wonderful time,” he says. “We had about 18,000 students and one campus, but it didn’t feel like you were at a large school. Everything was within walking distance. You got around on a bike or you walked.”

After medical school he chose a surgery specialty, and baseball factored into the decision.

“Surgery required a certain eye-hand coordination and it fascinated me,” he says. “It probably goes back to when I played sports. And the second fascination was the ability to make a difference in the health of patients in a short period of time.”

Murray interned in San Francisco, completed a residency at St. Louis University, served two years in the Army and, in 1970, returned to San Francisco to join a practice. He immediately became a Giants fan, and today delights in taking his grandchildren to games.

“One of the biggest joys of having this job is that during game time I will bring in one or two friends’ kids, or my grandchildren, to tour the locker room,” he says. “They’ll usually bring their dad along and take a picture by one of the lockers and look at the weight room, and I try to give them each a baseball so they usually get an autograph.

“It leaves a lasting impression. They just light up and, according to their parents, talk about it at home for days.” 