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Physician Spotlight

Patrick J. O'Neill, MD

Kennedy-White Orthopaedic Center, Sarasota

By JEFF WEBB

SARASOTA - As a man who has enjoyed two careers for which the stereotyped requisite is a healthy ego, Patrick O'Neill is both a contradiction and an inspiration.

O'Neill is a surgeon at the Kennedy-White Orthopaedic Center in Sarasota, where he is the only fellowship-trained foot-and-ankle specialist between Bradenton and Ft. Myers. But before he decided to tackle a career as an MD, O'Neill was a punter/kicker in the National Football League. Over three years, he played for the New England Patriots, the Chicago Bears and the New York Jets, before deciding that his calling was healing, not hash marks.

"I liked football, but I didn't live for it. ... The nature of the sport didn't really suit me very well," said O'Neill, who was an Academic All-American and University Scholar while attending Syracuse University on a football scholarship. "The football thing was great for me, but I always thought I would be doing something else long-term. I was a bioengineer major in college after switching out of chemical. The biology stuff interested me the most, so I think when I started to look at options long-term, medicine was on the list," he said.

O'Neill, the middle of three brothers, said he and his siblings were raised to do well in school and credits his parents for being "mildly obsessed" that they all excel in the classroom and in athletics. He said his upbringing was "nose-to-the-grindstone" and "family-focused, humble and sheltered." It was a supportive, environment, he said, but also very "achievement-oriented, with major focus on good grades." All three brothers were multi-sport athletes, with his older brother playing soccer at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and his younger brother was on the swim team at Princeton University.

O'Neill acknowledged that as a child "I was very introverted, shy, no



self-confidence. But I sure could kick," which he credits for "changing me the most into who I am. ... Having to force myself to perform taught me some self-control and my confidence built slowly. I learned more about myself, life, the world and to deal with success and failure," he said. Upon graduating from Syracuse, O'Neill was selected by the New England Patriots in the fifth round of the 1994 NFL draft. After his first season, he "did some neuroscience doctoral work back at SU in the offseason, realized it wasn't for me and then seriously started thinking about medicine. In the NFL, kickers have to move around and there is not much job security," he said. "You have to ask yourself 'How much do I love it? And how long can I do it?'" Besides, he said, as a punter/kicker, "I wasn't making a superstar salary."

O'Neill took the MCAT "after my second year (that season was with the Chicago Bears), then after my third season (with the New York Jets), as I was between teams, I realized that it was time to switch," he said. O'Neill was 27 years old when he enrolled in 1998

at John Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, "which was a nice surprise," he said, because it was a relatively short drive to his family's home in Harrisburg.

Following his surgical residency and fellowship, also at John Hopkins and Union Memorial Hospital, O'Neill said he "interviewed up and down the East Coast, but I liked it here the most. Between the job and the (Sarasota) area, it was a great opportunity."

O'Neill is in his third year at Kennedy-White and in some ways it reminds him of his experiences on the gridiron. Being a member of the 11-physician group "is like playing on a team," he said. "They have a great relationship with their young partners. It's a great group of guys with a very high success rate."

As the only fellowship-trained foot-and-ankle surgeon in the area, O'Neill has a definite niche upon which to build his practice. "The surgical focus is pretty intensive," he said. "There are lots of bony cuts and bony fixations. We're better suited for bigger, more complicated revisions, such as ankle and hind foot procedures, than podiatrists are historically," said O'Neill, who operates at both Sarasota Memorial Hospital and Doctor's Hospital of Sarasota.

Having a good bedside manner is important to O'Neill, and being introverted as a youngster is now an asset, he said. "I definitely feel that having a shy side helps now. For people who have trouble saying what they want to say, I can relate and help them. I get them to trust me and gain their confidence. I have the ability to talk to many different people," he said.

And, predictably, a lot of people want to talk to him about being a professional football player.

"It's certainly good for business," O'Neill admitted. "I have some (memorabilia) up on the walls, but I don't make a big deal out of it. It's just something I did for a while. I am very appreciative

of the opportunity. I was pretty good at it," he said.

"And I see patients who are athletes and they understand that I understand what they are going through. I've been there and I've had my own foot problems along the way," O'Neill said. And he doesn't object when he hears a patient say "Not only is my doc really good, but he also was a professional athlete!"

But the gridiron glory days don't get many replays in his personal life. "If I'm out with friends I don't talk about it much. People sometimes ask questions, and some even want autographs," he said, acknowledging his respect for word-of-mouth advertising.

O'Neill's schedule doesn't allow for much free time, he said. But the time he can find is spent helping his wife Heather, whom he met at Syracuse, where she was a field hockey player, raise their son Conor, 9, and daughter Emily, 6. "They are sweet kids with lots of energy, well-adjusted and confident," O'Neill said. "They're getting a feel for what I do and ask questions. I take them to work from time to time. My son recently got hold of a textbook with a surgical video. He thinks it's cool that I cut people open," he laughed.

And how does a 40-year-old former professional athlete stay in good physical shape these days? "I'm not working out much" because of time constraints, he said, "but I try to run three or four times a week. It's easy because I can just throw on my shoes and go."

One might guess that O'Neill would have a regular date with his television during football season, but they would be wrong. "I don't watch football. I like to watch individual sports," he said. Given the chance, he probably would watch soccer, which was the sport he was playing when his buddies talked him into becoming the kicker on the high school football team.