A SAFETY NET

MERCYHEALTH PROVIDES CARE FOR ROCKFORD UNIVERSITY ATHLETES

As Malik Johnson waits for treatment on one of the tables in Rockford University’s training room, his football coach steps in and starts talking to athletic trainer Meghan Smith, MS, ATC, LAT. The two discuss the linebacker’s progress in recovering from a shoulder injury, and the coach reminds Meghan that the team’s first home game — and Homecoming — is in less than two weeks. “Hear that?” he playfully calls to Malik. “Heal by then!”

Meghan Smith is a Mercyhealth athletic trainer who works full time at Rockford University, diagnosing and treating injuries and helping players stay healthy.
Dr. Anthony Rizzo, sports medicine physician at Mercyhealth, sees student-athletes at Rockford University every Monday.

Holli Hall is the lead athletic trainer at Rockford University.

Of course, Malik doesn’t have much control over how quickly his injury heals, and all three of them know it. Fortunately, he has Meghan in his corner — not only to help him recover safely, but also to communicate with his coaches about the reality of whether he can play or not. “The trainers really care about us as people and want to make sure we’re the best we can be,” says Malik.

Meghan, who is employed by Mercyhealth, represents the new partnership between the health system and Rockford University. Starting this school year, Mercyhealth is the exclusive sports medicine provider for all athletics at the university. That means Meghan works full time there alongside head athletic trainer Holli Hall (who is employed by Rockford University). Together, the two evaluate injuries, help student-athletes through rehabilitation, and are present at all games and some practices. Every Monday, Dr. Anthony Rizzo, sports medicine physician at Mercyhealth, sees student-athletes to evaluate and treat injuries and, if necessary, refer them to a specialist. “Our job is to be a safety net for the athletes, but then help them return to play as quickly as possible,” says Dannielle Koran, LAT, ATC, lead athletic trainer for Mercyhealth.

All the athletes who are hanging out in the training room have one thing in common: They want to spend as little time off the field or court as possible. Injuries — past or present — can sideline a student-athlete for days, weeks or even months, and most of them will do whatever it takes to minimize an injury’s impact.

Sophomore volleyball player Nicole Eggers tore the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) in her knee during her senior year of high school, and now she spends 45 minutes in the training room before each practice. When she toured Rockford University before signing on to play volleyball there, she made a point of meeting Holli so she knew she would have help in preventing reinjury. Now, she says it’s comforting knowing she has an entire medical team at Mercyhealth that is dedicated to her health. “If we do get hurt,” she says, “there are medical professionals who will help us get back to the game in a safe way.”

A HEALTHY PARTNERSHIP

Mercyhealth’s partnership with Rockford University means that it offers:
• Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and first aid instruction for coaches
• Multidisciplinary sports physicals performed by Mercyhealth physicians and athletic trainers.
• Athletic training services (event coverage and training room presence) to supplement RU’s own athletic trainer
• Physician training room visits and a physician presence at football games

If an athlete is injured on the field or court, either Meghan or Holli is on site, ready to administer first aid and assess the injury. They will decide whether the athlete needs to visit an emergency room or urgent care, or whether he or she can wait to see Dr. Rizzo on Monday. Dr. Rizzo is connected with many Mercyhealth specialists who will be able to fast-track the athlete to the proper care. “The athletes know they can count on us to keep them as safe and healthy as possible,” says Meghan. “We are there for them when they need us.”

SUPPORT FOR ATHLETES

It’s 3 pm on a Tuesday, and the training room is a flurry of activity. Both Meghan and Holli stay busy as more and more athletes stream in. Some just need an ankle or wrist taped for support. (“Some people think that’s all athletic trainers do,” says Meghan, “but there’s so much more to our job.”) Others are recovering from an injury such as a sprained ankle or shoulder dislocation and need help with rehabilitation. Many of the athletes in the room are waiting for Meghan or Holli to help them with special stretching exercises so they can reduce their chance of reinjury.