

Chiropractic Keeps Cardinals and Rams on Top: DC Cares for Pro Football and Baseball Teams in St. Louis

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When he was a child, Ralph Filson remembered watching his father, a first-generation doctor of chiropractic, care for a small group of players from the St. Louis Cardinals baseball team. "I'd hear the names and think, 'what a neat thing to do,'" Filson said. At the time, however, providing such care was not as readily accepted as it is today. "It was always behind closed doors," he added. Little did Filson know that just a few years later, he'd be delivering the same chiropractic care, not just for members of the Cardinals, but also for this year's defending Super Bowl champions, the St. Louis Rams of the National Football League.

A 1969 graduate of Logan Chiropractic College, Filson became interested in competitive sports through weightlifting, treating members of several U.S. Olympic teams while competing in tournaments himself for more than 20 years.

That experience in the arena of amateur sports led to his first chiropractic encounter with a professional athlete a few years later. In 1987, a fellow parishioner in Filson's church introduced him to a pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals. Filson soon began caring for the pitcher, continuing a tradition his father had begun decades earlier.

Now a professor of Chiropractic Sciences at Logan College of Chiropractic, Dr. Filson has found himself in a rather unique situation. By providing care for both the Rams and Cardinals, he is believed to be only DC in the United States to serve as the official chiropractor for two major sports franchises in the same city.

In coordination with the start of football season and the pennant chase in baseball this September, Dynamic Chiropractic contacted Dr. Filson and asked about his role with the Rams and Cardinals. During the course of the interview, Dr. Filson spoke on a variety of subjects, including how to treat certain conditions in professional athletes, how doctors of chiropractic can become more involved with sports teams, and how chiropractic can benefit athletes and non-athletes alike.

Dynamic Chiropractic (DC): Dr. Filson, how did you become the chiropractor for the Cardinals, and later the Rams?

Dr. Filson (RF): They (the Rams) called the Cardinals. They were looking for a chiropractor. Their orthopedic surgeons, the trainers, and the general manager all recommended me to the Rams.

The recommendation for the Cardinals was one of those fairytale things. After the World Series in 1987, I took care of a couple players. I was taking care of players every year until 1990, and then Joe Torre took over as manager. One of my friends who teaches at Life University, Bob Schlamp, referred him to me when he came to St. Louis. He was later fired and went to the Yankees. Joe's really pro-chiropractic; he was a great liaison between the Cardinals and myself. When he left St. Louis, though, it was interesting because a lot of people - the trainers, even the general manager -

still were sending patients to our office.

Then Mark McGwire got to town in 1997. He started coming up to my office, and then he asked me if I'd be interested in coming down to the Cardinals' training room and working on him and some of the players there. I said it'd be really good, but politically, and from a medical standpoint, I didn't know how they would feel about it.

The next thing I knew, I got a phone call from the trainer, went down and did an interview. During Mark's historic year, I took care of him and all the rest of the players through the whole season, and I've been there ever since.

That's what led to the Rams. This was an unbelievable first year for me. They had another chiropractor there before, but some situations developed, and so they needed somebody. They called the Cardinals about me. Their orthopedist and internist asked if I'd be interested in the job, and then the Rams' personnel and trainer contacted me. I started one year ago last August.

DC: Did you get to travel with the Rams during the playoffs and the Super Bowl?

RF: I didn't travel during the season. My office is very close to the Rams' camp, so during the week, they would send the players to my office. If they were leaving town, they usually left on Saturdays, so I'd go and treat the Rams Saturday morning. On Sundays, when they were playing in St. Louis, I'd go down early in the morning and treat them the day of the game.

We had the entire playoffs here (in St. Louis). Before every playoff game Then the Rams flew my wife and I down for the Super Bowl. I arrived on Thursday, and I was treating them Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

DC: Do you see the players as frequently during the off-season and training camp?

RF: Not as frequently. I see them much more during the season and training camp. In the off-season, we may see one or two of the players, but a lot of them don't live in St. Louis, so they travel home.

I was amazed that most of the football players I've treated have had a very good past history of chiropractic care in high school, college, or professionally. They've all had pretty consistent chiropractic care. They were very 'in-tune' with chiropractic and thought a lot of it, and they were very interested in preventive care. Having some of the results they've had, they saw how it improved their game.

DC: That's something you still don't hear a lot about. You always hear of the team physician or trainer, or even the team dentist, but not the team chiropractor.

RF: Since the Rams won, I've had more chiropractors call me that have been on the verge of getting involved with professional and college teams, in both baseball and football. It's just been amazing how many people have contacted me and asked for assistance and help.

DC: What would you recommend for the DC who wants to get involved with a sports team?

RF: I think everybody knows how good chiropractic is, and that spinal adjusting prevents injury and enhances the athlete's performance. Most of the time, your open door is through the trainer rather than the medical staff. The trainer seems to be the key player; he's like the 'gatekeeper' for all the teams.

If you make contact with the trainer and have a good relationship, that's a good thing. Some trainers I've worked with have sometimes even made statements at their conventions where they feel like everybody should have at least one chiropractor in the training room.

The orthopedists are the same way. Some of them understand what we do, some don't, but they see the results. They're pretty much pro-chiropractic. I was always been taught in chiropractic college that if you get the patient in, you don't have to be a good salesman if you can just produce the results. I think in professional sports, you don't get a chance at selling it; they're looking at performance and what you can do to keep their players healthy and on the field.

DC: What other professional sports teams do you know of that employ chiropractors?

RF: I know Dr. Nick Athens is with the San Francisco Giants. I know that Allan Palmer is with the Arizona Diamondbacks. The Cincinnati Reds have a chiropractor. Those are the only ones I know of, offhand, that are official.

There are a couple more that are unofficial. Sometimes, unofficially they have a chiropractor come in. The Tennessee Titans had their chiropractor (at the Super Bowl), but the players wanted him.

DC: Getting back to the type of care you deliver, what types of conditions do you see most often? Do you see any differences between the football players and baseball players?

RF: It depends on the situation. With the linemen, you see a lot more lower back problems and disc problems. A lot of them have previous histories of bad backs with spondylolisthesis. The running backs can have back and shoulder and neck conditions, because a lot of them take their shots high up, whereas the linemen take it down low. You kind of divide the spine in half depending on where they're playing.

The interesting part about it is that all the players I've seen are used to full-spine chiropractic adjusting. You check the pelvis, the lumbar, thoracic and cervical spine, and they're used to all those areas being adjusted. There are a couple exceptions to the rule, but most of the time, good, full-spine chiropractic adjusting is what they want and what they get.

DC: What about baseball players?

RF: With the hitters, especially a guy like Mark McGwire, you're real concerned with the lower back. That's been his history. For most of your bigger hitters, you're interested in their lower back.

With pitchers, you're very interested in their cervical and thoracic spines. Mechanically, those are the areas that carry the nerve supply to the shoulder and arm muscles. By adjusting and keeping their upper thoracic and lower cervical spine in balance, they perform and pitch much better. There aren't near the amount of shoulder problems and shoulder injuries.

DC: In addition to pro athletes, you also have a regular patient base. What differences do you see between the athletes and your regular patients?

RF: The professional athletes, most of the time, are so in tune with their bodies. They know their living is made by their bodies, and that everything has to function 100%. They spare no moment in getting treatment. They want their treatments and want to make sure everything functions. They know they're at risk with their careers if they don't keep their bodies perfectly in sync or aligned.

Patients are aware of it, but they don't realize it because most of the time, their bodies doesn't determine their livelihood. Professional athletes make their living with their bodies, so they're

more in tune with them. Most of my patients are in tune with their bodies, but they're not obsessed with it quite the same way.

DC: What is the most enjoyable part about being the official chiropractor for a pair of pro sports teams?

RF: I think the most exciting part right now, because of my chiropractic background, is getting chiropractic out there and seeing how it works. Everything that we've ever been taught in chiropractic, we should all be very proud of, because it works. We can prove it. You can see the difference.

With chiropractic, sometimes I think it's show and tell - here's what we did, this is the way the athletes perform -- and I know that we made a difference. The year that McGwire hit 70 home runs, I had a number of players come up to me and say, "Do you realize how important you were to him this year?" They saw it.

It's the same thing with some of the football players. I talked to a couple of linemen with bad backs who said, "God, Doc, if you didn't fix us up, we wouldn't be playing." I think professional sports made me realize even more how great of a profession chiropractic is.

DC: Is there a final message you would like to tell the chiropractic profession about what it can do, not just for athletes, but the population in general?

RF: I think our profession hasn't totally realized its potential as far as health care, and the ability for us to prevent injuries from a professional standpoint, and we haven't reached our full potential to see how we can help athletes better. We should be able to do that not only for professional athletes, but for all of our patients. I sometimes think we get hung up worrying about too many other things, and we forget how good the profession is for people.

For me to be able to do what I've done ... I told my wife that God's really been good to me. In one year, I've gone to the World Series in Yankee Stadium and to the Super Bowl. How much more could you have? It was just super.

We've got so much good to offer to the American public. I think professional sports sends the message to the American public that 'hey, look, we realize how good chiropractic is.' The rest of the world should, too.

DC: Thank you, Dr. Filson.

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