Remembering Dr. John F. Duff '45

A visionary clinician, a pioneer in the field of orthopedic sports medicine, and the charismatic healer of scores of St. John’s Prep athletes, longtime North Shore resident Dr. John F. Duff ’45 passed away peacefully in the early morning hours of Thursday, April 1, following a period of declining health. A resident of Brooksby Village in Peabody, where he grew up, he was 93.

A self-described “family doctor of orthopedics,” Duff was a groundbreaking thinker in his discipline, becoming one of the first orthopedic physicians to leave the umbrella of a major medical center to form a specialty private practice devoted to sports medicine in 1962. He completed the first arthroscopic knee cartilage repair ever performed on the North Shore in 1974.

Throughout his 42-year career, he demonstrated a single-minded focus on preventative and post-injury treatment for everyone from high school competitors to college-bound scholarship athletes to weekend warriors. Born in Dallas, Texas, he drew patients to his Danvers office of the North Shore Sports Medical Center from as far south as Cape Cod and as far north as Portland, Maine. “My patients range from five- to six-year-old gymnasts to 77-year-old tennis players,” he once said in describing his practice. “I guess I gravitated toward this specialty because I’m something of a frustrated athlete myself. Now, I still try to be as much of an athlete as time allows. I even wish I could play football on weekends, but my wife won’t let me.”

Possessing a bedside manner of warmth, humor, charm, and forethought, Duff’s deep and abiding care and concern for youth athletes will stand as his most enduring legacy. He was tireless in his quest to educate coaches and parents about the physiological limits of still-developing muscles, joints, bones, brains, and emotional capacities.
The doctor served as the team physician or sports medical consultant for the athletic program at St. John’s Prep from 1962-92, in addition to assuming the same role at Salem State University, Danvers High, and Governor’s Academy for parts of four decades. He was twice a member of the medical staff for the U.S. Olympic Team at the Pan-American Games and spent two summers as the team physician at the U.S. Olympic Training Center in Colorado. He founded the Massachusetts Medical Society’s Committee on Sports Medicine and was appointed as the U.S. representative to the first World Sports Medicine Congress in 1975.

One of the first orthopedic surgeons in the state—if not the first—to vertically integrate his practice, Duff onboarded the Boston Bruins’ trainer to offer physical therapy inside his office’s dedicated PT clinic, hired a podiatrist to hold weekly running clinics and offer preventive and diagnostic solutions to lower extremity injuries, and offered evening walk-in hours for rapid diagnosis of sports injuries. At that time, there were fewer than 400 sports medicine orthopedic specialists in the entire country.

Duff was out in front on a number of seldom-discussed or unpopular sports safety practices that are now considered pro forma. A vocal proponent of outlawing football contact initiated with the helmet as early 1974, he also campaigned for mandatory mouthguards, ice hockey face shields, and continuous hydration during athletic activity, especially preseason training. He advised that all coaches should be trained in CPR as well as receive EMT instruction.

Throughout the 1970s, he promoted limits on pitch counts and innings-pitched as well as setting a minimum age for pitches involving elbow rotation, like a curveball. He pressed for capping total games played for youth athletes by factoring in both club team and scholastic contests, and he dismissed claims of the day that girls weren’t physically suited to play Little League, declaring that arguments to the contrary were a product of sociological not medical reasoning. In 1971, almost a decade before the birth of the MIAA, Duff approached the Massachusetts Secondary School Principals Association and urged the group to revolutionize the attention being given to the health and safety of scholastic student-athletes. “He didn’t just come with rhetoric,” recalled Bill Gaines, executive director of the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association. “He asked to form a Committee on Sports Medicine and brought on some remarkable professionals who had a dramatic impact on rules, regulation, safety, equipment, and materials in statewide scholastic sports.”

Duff had a leg up on peer orthopedic surgeons almost from the get-go. Upon completing his surgical residency at Boston City Hospital, he served as a captain in the U.S. Army Medical
Service with the 97th General Hospital in Frankfurt, Germany, from 1956-58. He performed a high number of orthopedic surgeries during his deployment and returned to the United States with considerably more operating room experience than his contemporaries.

The second-eldest of nine children, Duff had been married to Beverly native Estamari Shea for three years by the time he shipped out to Germany. The only child of Joseph and Esther Shea, “Esty” was president of her college graduating class and taught at both The Birch Wathen School in Manhattan and Shore Country Day School in Beverly before raising the couple’s eight children. The family lived in Peabody and Danvers before settling in South Byfield. Duff’s wife predeceased him in 2011 following a long illness after 58 years of matrimony. Their union is responsible for 13 grandchildren and four great-grandchildren to date.

**FAR AHEAD OF THE CURVE**

Contextualizing Duff’s norm-shattering beliefs and how early on he pressed them publicly helps inform his professional influence. The first official team of physicians to treat athletes at an Olympic Games wasn’t formed until the summer of 1968. The American Orthopedic Society for Sports Medicine wasn’t established until 1972. Duff was already on another plane years earlier. The doctor organized the Commonwealth’s first Sports Injury Conference in October of 1962, held at Hunt Memorial Hospital in Danvers, where he later served as chief orthopedic surgeon. He made it an annual event for more than a decade. In 1965, Duff told the Boston Globe, “(Treating) sports injuries is a specialty. We need more education along this line (and I) would like to see our medical schools give courses on sports injury.”

Duff was an early champion of cardiovascular fitness activity. In 1972, he told the New York Sunday News “Colororoto Magazine,” that “Anyone concerned about general good health will have to consider an aerobic exercise program.” He also noted, “Any kind of physical activity is better than watching TV and they all provide relief from normal psychological tension.”

Duff earned his B.S. at Boston College and his M.S. at the University of Massachusetts. His training as an M.D. came at the New York Medical College, where he was an elected member of the Cors et Manus society before graduating in 1954. He interned and completed his residency at Boston City Hospital, receiving his orthopedic training at the Lahey Clinic. He also offered instruction to hundreds of young physicians as a teaching fellow in orthopedics from 1966-96 at Tufts Medical School at the New England Medical Center.

The doctor was a charter member and served as chairman of the MIAA Committee on Sports Medicine. He was also chairman of the Massachusetts Delegation to the American Orthopedic
Society for Sports Medicine. He spent a decade on the Massachusetts Department of Public
Health’s Sports Injury Task Force.

Duff, who later called arthroscopy “a beautiful thing,” made the unusual decision to retrain under
the nation’s few arthroscopic specialists in the early 1970s, more than 15 years after graduating
from medical school. “He deserves a lot of credit for that,” said Dr. Dave St. Pierre ’70, Duff’s
former partner practitioner. “To go back and learn the newest science, that was a real feather in
his cap. It was probably the biggest surgical breakthrough of our generation and he got good at it.
It was much less invasive and there was much less downside for the patient and he recognized
that right away.”

A FAMILY AFFAIR
A sought-after public speaker, Duff delivered over 500 lectures and presentations to doctors,
coaches, athletic trainers, parents, and student-athletes in his career, including at the first annual
meeting of the American Orthopedic Society for Sports Medicine in 1974. He also wrote a book
entitled “Youth Sports Injuries: Medical Handbook for Parents and Coaches,” printed by

“I have great admiration for coaches,” Duff told the media in 1985. “They are very valuable to
us. The facts of life are out there on the field.”

Former St. John’s football coach Fred Glatz, 87, affirmed the doctor’s respect and affinity for
youth mentors who roamed the sidelines.

“He was a great guy, a straightforward guy, a hard-working guy,” said Glatz. “He was someone
who really cared about our program, and our kids. Anything we put forward pertaining to a kid
or an injury, or a problem, he had no problem. He fixed it. I’m sure he got guys back on the field
for us a week or two before they might have otherwise, but the most important thing to him was
making sure we took care of the kids, collectively.”

The son of Paul F. Duff, a general practitioner with surgical training, Dr. Duff was proud to be
part of a three-generation medical family—his son, Greg, a 1982 graduate of the Prep, became an
Other familial Prep alumni include his brothers Brian ’48, Roderick ’50, Kevin ’52, Gerald ’55
(all deceased), and Brendan ’62, as well as two of his sons, John Duff, Jr. ’73, and the
aforementioned Greg ’82. His two grandsons are also graduates: Johnathan Duff ’01 and Dylan Cox ’03. The Dr. Paul H. Duff Fund scholarship at St. John’s Prep is named for Duff’s father. Duff’s fondness for St. John’s Prep, where he himself played football, never waned. Just days before his death, he noted, “I gave my heart and soul to St. John’s and I wouldn’t change that for anything.”

Not surprisingly, Duff garnered a long list of honors and accolades throughout his lifetime. In 2018, he became the seventh recipient of the Crystal Eagle Award in St. John’s 114-year history when the School’s Athletic Hall of Fame honored him in recognition of his lifetime of service and dedication to Prep athletics. In 2001, Duff received the American Orthopedic Society for Sports Medicine’s Thomas A. Brady Award, which recognizes sports medicine professionals who make a mark on their local community.

The National Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association presented Duff with its Distinguished Service Award in 1993. Also the recipient of distinguished service awards from the Massachusetts High School Coaches Association (1977) and the Massachusetts Secondary School Principals Association (1976), he is an inductee of the Agganis All-Star Game Hall of Fame.

The funeral Mass will be celebrated on Friday, April 9 at St. Mary’s Annunciation Church, Conant Street Danvers at 10:30 am, and will be livestreamed. Visiting hours will be held April 7 at Conway, Cahill-Brodeur Funeral Home, 82 Lynn Street, Peabody, from 4 to 7 pm. Burial will be in St. Joseph’s Cemetery, 990 La Grange Avenue, West Roxbury.