

Bill West MD CCFP(EM) DipSportMed MSc

For the first part of his life, Dr West was the eldest child, unchallenged and rebellious. And in what seemed like a stroke to a young boy, at the age of 9, he became the second youngest of 8: his mother married a general surgeon with 4 children. His competitive life began. Dr West strove to be the smartest, fastest, and strongest. He stopped getting into trouble and converted that energy into academics and sports. He watched his surgeon stepfather work hard, long hours.

Dr West became a competitive swimmer (freestyle, breast stroke) and water polo player, eventually making the Canadian Senior Men's National Water Polo Team. On the national team he trained 5 to 7 days a week; at peak times he put in 5 hours a day, split before and after school. He excelled in both undergraduate school at McMaster and at varsity sports, but he didn't succeed at getting into medical school in the first round.

He retooled. He spent time teaching swimming. He spent time in Europe as a ski instructor. He visited a "1%" rich uncle in California who refused to give his nephew the trappings of wealth. His uncle would say, "You have to earn it." The uncle had a Ferrari in the garage but wouldn't let the young Dr West drive it.

You have to earn it.

Dr West cleaned his uncle's house to earn his room and board. He took care of his aunt and uncle's son. He left California for graduate school at McMaster (human physiology) and was eventually accepted into medical school. He took additional emergency room training after his family medicine residency and entered into an emergency practice in Richmond, BC, where he was soon recruited by Bob Morrell, local physician and Canadian National Ski Team legend. This became a large commitment: over a dozen ski meets held around the world each year.

Is it appropriate that the terminology for writing the Diploma in Sports and Exercise Medicine exam without a residency is called "challenging" the exam? Dr West challenged the exam, succeeded, and his sports medicine visibility translated into taking on additional work: team physician with the Canadian Men's Under-18 National Hockey Team. This in turn led to more work: team physician for the Vancouver Giants, a Western Hockey League major junior team.

To understand sports physicians affiliated with teams, one has to know how teams work. One has to be willing to sacrifice for a team. Team physicians have to work hard. A team is reluctant to make a change when things are going well. Physicians are part of that chemistry—to play well, players need doctors they can trust, that know they can be contacted at strange hours.

Competing: Dr West plays Ping-Pong with the Giants players. He's good. He wins. The young men are 16 to 20 years old. The players ask him, frustrated, "How old are you, man?"

Dr West laughs and says, "I'm 45. Bring it on." Why let them win? They wouldn't let him win: this is the paradox of how teams win together, by competing against one another.

Dr West's California uncle died a few years ago. He willed the car to Dr West. 🍁

Cover photo: Cathy Ferguson, Victoria, BC

Story: Shane Neilson MD CCFP, Erin, Ont

Additional photos and the French translation of the story appear on page 440.

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