



HANDS-ON APPROACH

BY DANIEL J. VACCARO

MIKE KEIRNS HAS NEVER THROWN DOWN A HIGHLIGHT-REEL DUNK.

HE DOESN'T GRAB CRUCIAL REBOUNDS, HIT CLUTCH FREE THROWS OR MAKE MOMENTUM-CHANGING BLOCKED SHOTS. IN FACT, HE DOESN'T EVEN GET OFF THE BENCH MOST GAMES. AND YET HIS HANDS-ON APPROACH TO PHYSICAL THERAPY MAKES HIM A KEY CONTRIBUTOR TO THE DENVER NUGGETS' SUCCESS. »

Somewhere in the heart of the Pepsi Center, Mike Keirns is earning his paycheck. He is putting Nuggets' star Wilson Chandler through a series of movements – manipulating knees, thighs and back – so the small forward will be ready to practice.

The training room is a part of professional sports very few people see. Here the lights aren't as bright as center court and the work isn't as glamorous. But it's just as essential. Strong bodies make the sharp cuts, slick crossovers and explosive dunks possible, and that's what the people come to see.

Keirns understands this better than most. The training room is his workshop, and it is a gift to watch him ply his craft. His fingers move with the surety of a master musician, and his knowledge of the body is obvious in the way he handles it, with reverence for its capacity and respect for its limitations. But even more impressive is the way his hands work in concert with his words. He is constantly asking questions: How did you sleep last night? What did you have for breakfast? How's your girlfriend? How do your knees feel this morning? These rapid-fire queries fall somewhere between the Socratic method and talk therapy, and they are a part of what makes Keirns a different kind of physical therapist.

"Of course I want to help athletes maximize their physical potential," said Keirns. "That's my job. But I'm also concerned with their mental, emotional and spiritual growth. It's the only way I know how to be. It's the Regis way."

Keirns, a professor in and co-founder of Regis' School of Physical Therapy, brings Regis' mission into the training room, often by posing a question to players on the table. He will ask, for example, if leaders are born or formed. He enjoys watching the players turn these questions



over in their minds and formulate answers, and then challenging them to think again.

It is these intimate moments Keirns loves most about being a physical therapist. Sure, he enjoys his work. He's been obsessed with the body and sports for as long as he can remember. But it's the conversations he has with players when no one else is around – the opportunity to get to know each person on a deeper level, to make an impact on their lives that means the most to him.

These athletes, he is quick to point out, are about the same age or younger than many of his students at Regis. And Keirns has a teacher's heart.

GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

Keirns was on a yearlong sabbatical when he got the call from the Nuggets. It was the summer of 2013, and he was using his time away to write a book, deepen his spirituality and focus on his sports medicine

practice. The call was unexpected, given the timing, but not that surprising.

He'd had a relationship with the Nuggets for more than a decade, often serving as a consultant and treating players at his clinic. He knew the team valued his work, but didn't expect to be offered a full-time gig. The opportunity was compelling, but he was hesitant given the rigorous travel schedule. Past experiences as a PT for the University of Michigan, the Phoenix Suns and the Colorado Avalanche taught him how challenging life on the road can be. He also wanted to be sure he could honor his commitments at Regis.

Keirns and the Nuggets' management eventually worked out a compromise. When the team is home, he is at the Pepsi Center with the players. When they are away, he is on call. Players can phone him anytime to discuss physical ailments. And they do.

STUDENTS SPEAK



RUCHI BAGRODIA, RHCHP '15

"I have never worked with a group of classmates who are so intelligent, supportive and dedicated to not only doing well in the program, but to driving the PT profession forward."



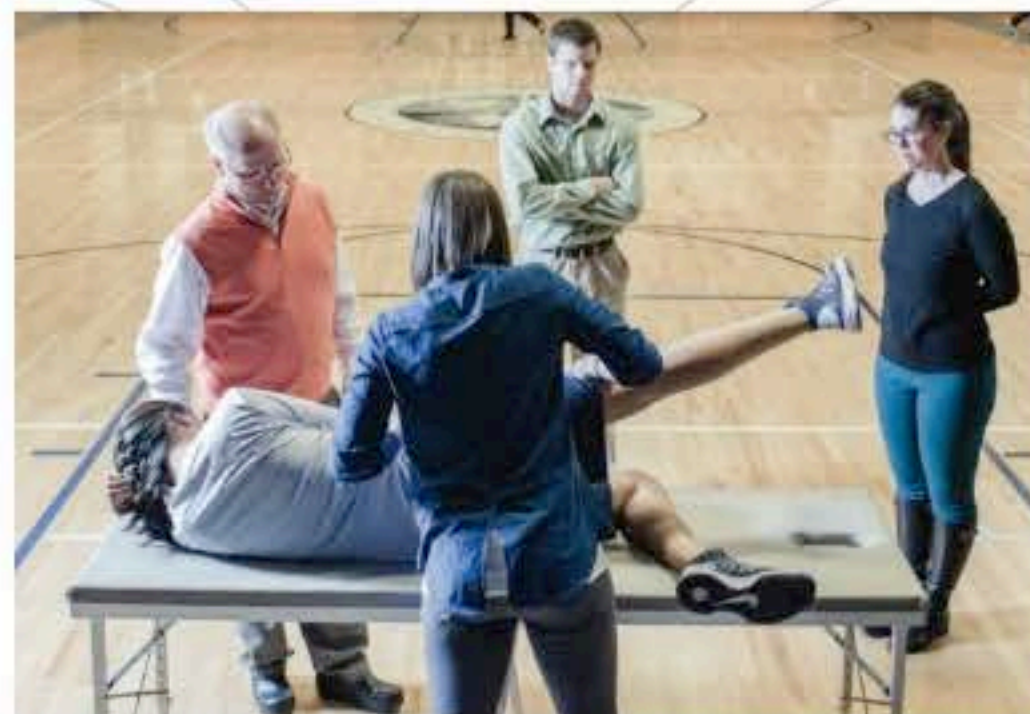
MATT LOPEZ, RHCHP '15

"The Regis PT program is widely respected across the nation. Our education prepares us to be critical thinkers who use the best evidence available to serve our patients. The lectures, labs and practicals all focus on the essential skills we will need in the clinic."



BARBARA FRITZ, RHCHP '15

"Regis' PT program is unique because it embodies the University's Jesuit mission and puts it into practice daily. As part of the PT program we complete service projects that relate to our curriculum and our passions."



In the end, it was an opportunity he simply couldn't pass up. He does the work he loves at the highest level while also generating more exposure for Regis' physical therapy program.

"If the platform opens some doors for my students, that's great," Keirns said. "Plus, I get to show them the profession from the inside. That is a priceless experience."

TOUCHING LIVES

The School of Physical Therapy celebrated its 20th birthday this year. For two decades, the school and its faculty have influenced the lives of students, and indirectly, the lives of the people those students go on to serve.

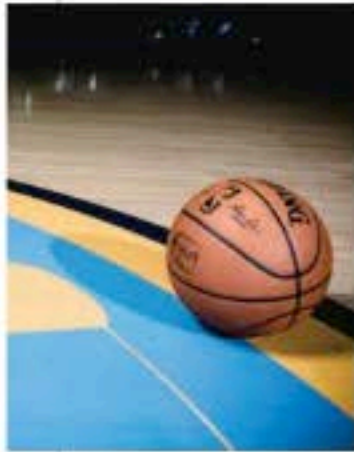
Keirns is one of its founding faculty. With Dean Barbara Tschoepe and

Joanne Whipple, he drew up the original curriculum.

"We had a vision of what the physical therapy profession should look like and so we created a program to match that vision," Keirns said. "Our curriculum embraces Jesuit values like service, leadership and treating the whole person: body, mind and soul. Those values make our program one of the best in the country."

Assistant Professor Christian Little couldn't agree more. She graduated from the Doctor of Physical Therapy program in 2007 and came back to teach in 2010 because she believes so strongly in Regis' mission. She was mentored by Keirns and sees herself as a mentor to the next generation of compassionate physical therapists.

"I'm also concerned with their mental, emotional and spiritual growth. It's the only way I know how to be. It's the Regis way."



"At Regis, students come first," she said. "Our goal is always to help students develop as professionals and leaders, but also as individuals."

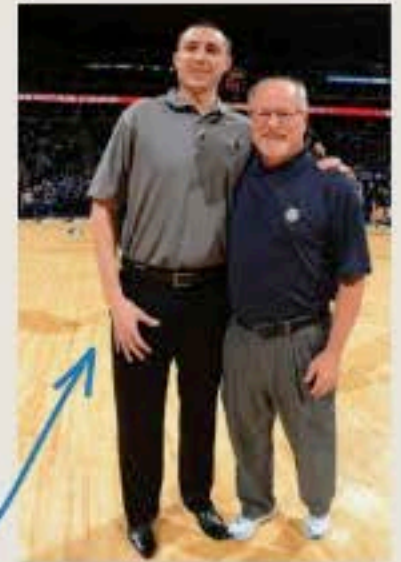
One of the ways this is accomplished is the program's intense focus on service. Unlike other PT programs, service learning is built into Regis' curriculum. The program gives students the opportunity to serve in local organizations and even globally, through immersion experiences in Ethiopia, Nicaragua and Peru.

There are also opportunities that don't count for credit, but still teach valuable lessons. For example, Keirns takes a group of volunteers to Arrupe Jesuit High School every Monday evening. There, future physical therapists from Regis work with high

school athletes, most of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds, to prevent injuries.

"It's fulfilling to see these high school students getting the same care as professional athletes," said Keirns. "And the Regis students are growing, too. They are learning what it means to serve. As physical therapists, we literally put our hands on people. We touch them. But a great physical therapist touches people's lives, too."

That's the way Keirns sees it - every interaction is an opportunity to make a difference in someone's life, whether it's the Denver Nuggets' star forward, a high school athlete or a Regis PT student on his or her way to great things. ■



MARK KYGER, RHCHP '05
DIRECTOR OF ATHLETIC THERAPY
Minnesota Timberwolves

"The PT program stresses principles I continue to practice today. Ideals such as taking a whole-body approach, as well as being a lifelong learner, have been constants through my professional career. Regis encouraged me to become a complete practitioner; one who keeps an open mind and is able to address any obstacle from multiple angles."



STEVE SCHER, RC '96, RHCHP '98
TEAM PHYSICAL THERAPIST
Detroit Lions

"Regis gave me a great education, but more importantly the tools to become a leader and innovator in the field. The program emphasizes growth and a desire to make a difference. The program prepared me for today's patients in the clinic and the rigorous demands of the NFL."