

A man with grey hair, wearing a light blue dress shirt, a patterned tie, and khaki pants, is kneeling on a green football field. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. The field has white yard lines and a large white number '50' in the background. In the distance, a blue stadium wall with the word 'BUFFALO' is visible.

IN THE GAME

UB dentists watch
the oral health of
hometown teams



Gregory Hudecki, '72, has followed the Buffalo Bills since their 1960 American Football League debut. He remembers spending game day at War Memorial Stadium, sitting up in the 40th row with a hot dog in hand and eyes on the field. David Croglia, '87, is equally fond of the Buffalo Sabres. He has shared season tickets with friends for the past 15 or 20 years. His memories of the ice hockey franchise stretch back into his childhood, when he became one of the team's first fans following its 1970 inception.

As boys, the two men lived Buffalo sports as many children do: They gossiped about favorite players, dreamed of the day Buffalo would bring a championship home and felt crushed when their teams came close to winning it all but never did.

Years later, as adults, Croglia and Hudecki's occupation has put them in touch with hometown athletics in a special way. Croglia is team dentist for the Sabres. Hudecki holds the same job for the Bills. On game day, you'll find him on the sideline at Ralph Wilson Stadium. To the north, at HSBC Arena, you might be able to make out Croglia sitting a few rows above the bench, ready to make his way to the locker room when something goes wrong.

Gregory Hudecki

For Hudecki, the Bills are all about tradition. As a boy, he was among fans who flooded the Rockpile for the Bills' first game. From the beginning, he had an intimate connection with the franchise. His father, Stephen, was the Bills' first official dentist. And even as a child, Hudecki worked for the team: On game day at the old stadium, he would sometimes "help out" by snapping polaroids from the boxes to provide the defense with a birds-eye view of visitors' offensive line-ups.

So it made sense when, in the late 1980s—after graduating from the School of Dental Medicine, serving two years in the Army and running a private practice—that Hudecki agreed to take over the job his dad was leaving. Hudecki already

had spent time as the team's associate dentist.

Through his decades with the Bills, Hudecki has observed sports dentistry evolve in the National Football League. In his father's time, dentists traveled with their team. But their ability to perform their duties was limited.

(As Hudecki explains, "You don't have an office, you're not licensed in that state, you don't have an operating room.") Since then, Hudecki and other NFL colleagues have formed an informal association, agreeing to take care of visitors' dental problems in addition to the home team's.

Another change: Better protective gear has prevented facial injuries that used to be more common. Years ago, Hudecki remembers treating a player with a fractured lower jaw, wiring the athlete's mouth in a fixed position to allow the bone to heal. Modern helmets, face masks and mouth guards have greatly reduced the risk of such damage, Hudecki says.

As a result, much of Hudecki's job centers on prevention. One of his duties: taking impressions of rookies' upper jaws during mini camp so he can craft mouth guards for them in time for training camp. These custom-fitted pieces—most in the Bills' basic blue—are crucial because non-customized models can make athletes gag or tear the tongue or cheek tissues.

Some new Bills join the team with

bulky, pre-made mouth guards that Hudecki says resemble pacifiers. Football players can be creatures of habit and superstitious, and some hesitate to give up their old gear: "It's like an old shoe. They feel comfortable with it," Hudecki explains. In these cases, he sees it as his

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responsibility to educate athletes about the benefits of proper, personalized protection.

Another challenge: convincing players to give up their grills. The metal tooth coverings, sometimes inlaid with gems, can trap food and bacteria. When Hudecki first began seeing such work in the 1980s, he had some success persuading athletes to remove their grills—mostly with the support of girlfriends or wives, "somebody that had a little juice," Hudecki says. But grills have grown in popularity over the past decade, and many men are firmly attached to their oral jewelry.

Hudecki emphasizes that he has no problem with oral adornments that aren't harmful. One of the most bizarre requests he has ever fulfilled was from a player

who wanted a gold star cast and cemented to a fake, front tooth.

Though bad oral injuries are rare these days, he is on call on Sundays on the sidelines in Orchard Park. Between games, he takes care of players, their wives and other team affiliates at his private practice in Amherst, performing cleanings, restorations and root canals, removing wisdom teeth and prescribing antibiotics for infections.

“We’ve had a close relationship with the Bills ever since their inception,” Hudecki explains. “I was very young when Buffalo started their franchise. I was a fan in high school and college. We used to go to the games at the old War Memorial Stadium, so I kind of grew up with them.

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David Croglio

The nightmare scenario for an ice hockey team dentist goes something like this, Croglio says: A stick to the face or flying puck slams into a player’s mouth, leaving behind a blood-soaked mess of tooth fragments and lacerations. The force of the impact rips out multiple teeth, leaving half a dozen grisly gaps.

Such an accident sounds incredible. But in the National Hockey League, these bad-luck episodes are real—and, apparently, uncomfortably common. Just this May, Chicago Blackhawks defenseman Duncan Keith reportedly lost seven teeth to a soaring puck in what a Chicago Tribune writer called a “toothsplosion.” The month before that, Washington Capitals forward Eric Belanger lost several of his own after taking a stick to the mouth.

Croglio, who joined the Sabres in 2009, has been fortunate in his first season: So far, the only oral injuries he has seen have been minor, including chipped teeth and cuts. But Croglio knows he needs to be ready for the worst. To illustrate why, he points to another story. Last fall, in a match-up between the Sabres

and Philadelphia Flyers, a slap shot struck Flyers winger Ian Laperrière in the face, costing him seven of his pearly whites. The game was in Philadelphia; had it happened in Buffalo, Croglio, who takes care of both the home and visiting teams at HSBC Arena, would have been the one rushing to treat the wounds.

For Croglio, who runs a general practice on Kensington Avenue in Amherst, his time with the Sabres has been eye-opening. He came to the franchise with plenty of experience: He has been the dentist for UB Athletics for well over a decade and teaches a year-long elective in sports dentistry as a clinical assistant professor at the School of Dental Medicine. So when Steve Jenson, the Sabres’ long-time oral surgeon, called Croglio in summer of 2009 to gauge his interest in working with the team, “There wasn’t a whole lot of hesitation on my part,” Croglio says.

But even with his background and years of watching hockey as a fan, Croglio says his minutes in the locker room have given him a new appreciation for the sport’s intensity—the level of training it requires, the devotion of its players. In a game last fall in Buffalo between the Sabres’ minor league affiliate, the Portland Pirates, and the Rochester Americans, Croglio found himself stitching up a player’s split lip while an orthopaedic surgeon worked simultaneously to close a head wound—all in time for the athlete to return the next period. The injuries resulted from a fight.

The game-day grit teammates display borders on unbelievable, Croglio says. He notes, for instance, that the Flyer’s Laperrière continued playing in the match against Buffalo even after the blow that knocked out seven teeth. Years ago, few hockey players wore mouth



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guards, despite the dangers. As Croglio explains, “It’s something about the teeth in hockey—you’re looked at as tougher without the mouth guard.”

Now, however, that culture is changing.

“Players are recognizing that taking some precautions, like wearing a mouth guard, isn’t necessarily a sign of weakness, but rather displaying some common sense. There are other ways to show your toughness on the ice besides losing teeth,” says Croglio, who sees educating athletes about oral health and the seriousness of injuries as part of his professional responsibilities.

Discovering what goes on behind the scenes in professional hockey has been fascinating. Last year, with the flu striking some players, he got to learn about the factors physicians had to consider in keeping athletes healthy.

And, of course, for a long-time fan, meeting the players is still thrilling. Five Sabres, having come across Croglio through his official duties, have signed on as regular patients. For his two teenage sons, Dad’s job is a dream come true. And while Croglio is no longer a child himself, working at HSBC Arena still inspires a sense of wonder.