

THIS IS WORKING FOR ME

Brian Cole, MBA '90, MD '90

Before rising to the top of sports medicine, the orthopedic surgeon made an early bet that business skills belonged in healthcare. That gamble is still working in his favor.

As a medical student, **Brian Cole, MBA '90, MD '90**, made an unusual decision: He pursued an accelerated MBA, one of only two people in his class to do so. That kind of foresight has paid off throughout his nearly three decades of practice. As managing partner at Midwest Orthopaedics at Rush, he oversees a practice with a budget of more than \$200 million, 11 surgery centers, more than 100 providers across seven clinics, and more than 1,200 employees. He also serves as acting chair of the Department of Orthopaedics, overseeing nearly 20 basic science researchers and a large graduate medical education program of orthopedic residents and fellows.

As a top sports medicine surgeon, Cole treats some of the best athletes in the world. He has been head team physician for the Chicago Bulls and co-team physician for the Chicago White Sox for more than 20 years. He established a cartilage transplant program aimed at delaying or avoiding joint replacement, holds medical-device patents, and contributes to the development of new minimally invasive surgical techniques for the shoulder, elbow, and knee.

I knew I wanted to be a physician in eighth grade. When it came to narrowing down my focus, I went from pediatrics to child psychiatry to obstetrics—to orthopedics in the end. I found the best fit working with motivated patients who were otherwise generally healthy and had specific goals to remain active or become active again. There was also a tremendous capacity for research in the field: finding things in the clinic, taking them to the lab, and bringing them back to the bedside. Orthopedics is so much more than seeing patients and doing surgery. It involves tremendous biotechnology innovations that require an understanding of the regulatory side of FDA trials and medical devices—essentially covering the entire gamut of the patient journey.

A monochromatic education would have been a disadvantage. I didn't know exactly what I was trying to learn in business school—that was the downside—but I also didn't know if I would have another opportunity once I started my career. I was used to being a student, so one more year, learning something totally different from what I had learned so far, seemed to make sense.

I figured I'd get a working vocabulary of business. It turned out to be much more than that. I felt like I was looking around corners. If you're in a leadership role as a physician, you can't avoid the business side. The MBA from Booth provided credibility, a foundation of knowledge, and an understanding of organizational

structure. These things have helped me deliver care in the way that I believe it needs to be delivered and have afforded me a degree of independence as a managing physician-practitioner.

What I learned was not about memorizing formulas. I gained the foundational principles that could be generalized to organizational structure. That's a paradigm I live every single day as managing partner of a large orthopedic group made up of accomplished individuals with some strong personalities. Serendipitously, that's probably what my MBA afforded me the most. It taught me to be mindful of stakeholders and to get the most out of people by appealing to their strengths. You're rarely going to get unanimity when making important decisions, but successful governance comes from building consensus.

Taking care of people is one of the most satisfying things I do. So much of my role has become administrative, but I do spend one or two days a week seeing patients and a similar amount of time doing surgery. Being on the front lines is priceless. I'd be less effective both in the office and the operating room without that experience. It would be like a basketball team having a coach who never played.

I don't underestimate the psychological impact of an injury. When I'm working with athletes, especially, it's important to provide a sense of optimism and reality. There's a fear of not getting to do what you love—even

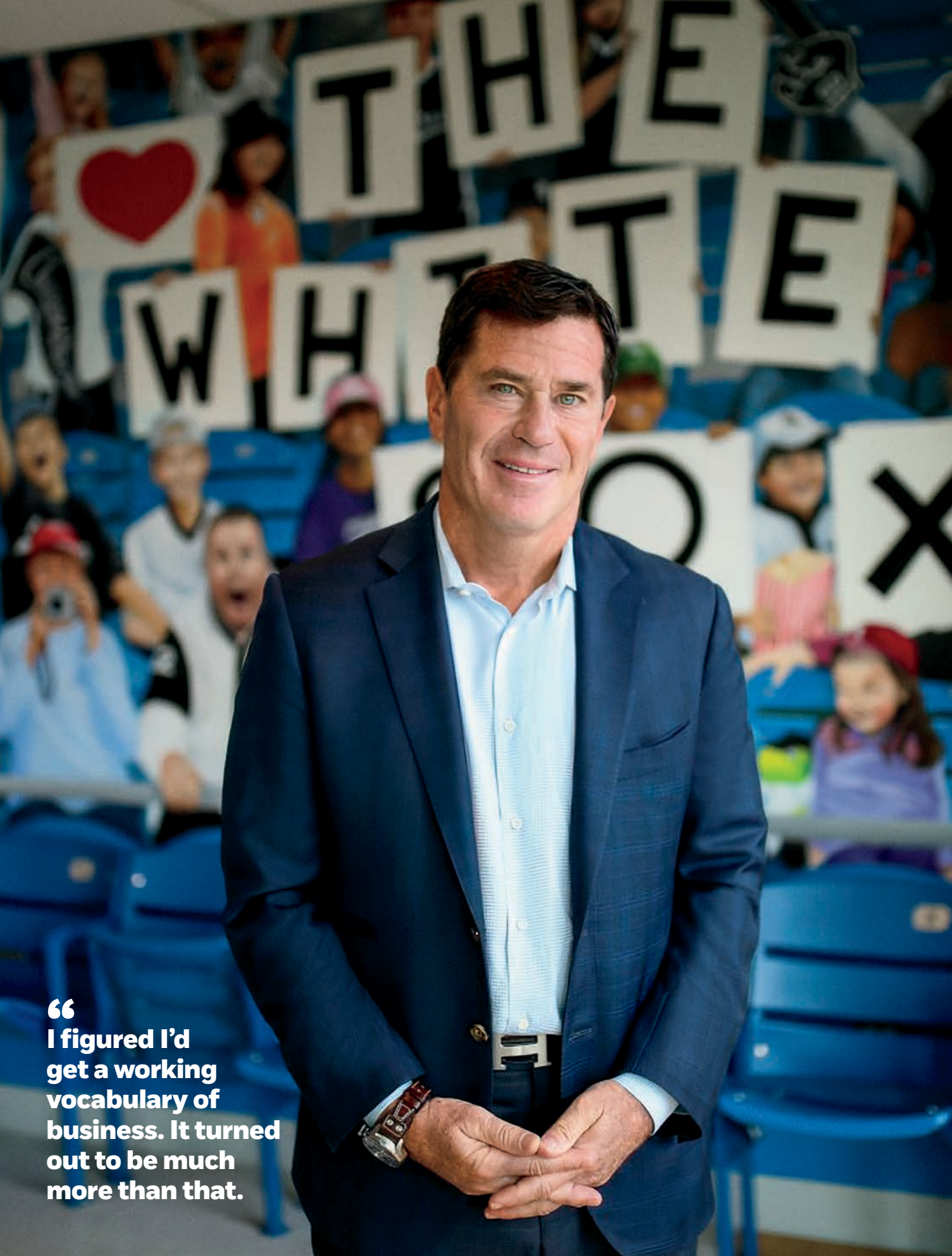
to not play the game you make a living doing. When appropriate, I take steps to explain the high probability of success following treatment. The glass is likely more than half full, but it requires patience and situational awareness to help patients understand that.

Our team did Lonzo Ball's knee cartilage transplant surgery. He was a Bulls player at the time. It was one of my most memorable moments as a surgeon. The cartilage was from a young man who died by suicide. The family chose to help others by donating several organs and his knee cartilage. I asked Lonzo if he wanted to reach out to the family to thank them, and he did. The man's mother, father, and siblings came to a Bulls game. Lonzo met them courtside. It showed the full circle of tragedy to renewal.

We face headwinds from declining reimbursement and broader financial challenges in healthcare. Orthopedic surgeons function in one of the only fields where expenses continue to increase based upon free-market forces while reimbursement is pegged to government guidelines and policy. There's a disconnect in what's happening that has real consequences.

Rush is a teaching hospital. People assume my fellows, residents, and students ask about the latest procedures, but as interested as they are in learning about advances in science and technology, they also want to know how I balance family life with the business, academic, and clinical work that I do. They want to know how to get it all done and not compromise one leg of the stool.

I place a premium on spending time off on family vacations. I try to shut off work when I'm away and prioritize what matters, and I think it makes me better at managing all of my other responsibilities. In May, we took a sailing trip in the Caribbean around Saint Martin and Saint Barths. My kids are in their 20s now, and they all brought a significant other. Everyone was together on the catamaran, talking, laughing, playing cards, and chilling. It was amazing downtime. We also have a home in Indiana where we frequently go for summer weekends, and we take ski trips in the winter. Staying active as a family is another piece of the puzzle. —ALINA DIZIK



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