

# Moments in surgery

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## Woody Hayes: The patient

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I WAS AT THE Ohio Chapter of the American College of Surgeons meeting in Dayton when Dr Bill Smead called on Friday to tell me that Ohio State football coach Woody Hayes had been admitted to the hospital with acute cholecystitis. He was the patient of Manuel Tzagournis, who was also dean of the College of Medicine at Ohio State University. Coach Hayes was diabetic and had arteriosclerosis (which would ultimately take his life). The clinical situation dictated urgent cholecystectomy and I drove from Dayton to Columbus to see the coach. There was no question of the diagnosis and the operation was performed on Saturday morning with Dr Smead as the first assistant. The operation was uneventful and there was gangrene in the gallbladder. Of course, the sponge count was correct.

Coach Hayes had an uneventful recovery and went home a few days after the operation. About 5 days later, a surgical resident called to say that the coach was in the emergency department with fever and leukocytosis. He had no complaints except for malaise. I told the resident to get an abdominal x-ray film and said, "He has a sponge in his belly." The resident asked why I would even suggest that diagnosis. My reply was "Think of the worst thing that could happen." To my regret the diagnosis was confirmed.

When Coach Hayes was admitted to the hospital,

the film was reviewed and the students and house staff on the service assembled to go see the patient. The entourage went into his room. I explained to the patient what had happened, and of course he wanted to know the implications. I explained that we must return to the operating room to remove the sponge. A laparotomy pad that had been used to displace the hepatic flexure of the colon had been missed at the completion of the cholecystectomy. After a brief description of the problem and its solution, I began to explain to the patient how bad I felt and what a "rookie" mistake it was to miss a sponge at the end of the procedure. After I had uttered about 2 sentences of contrition, Coach Hayes stopped me. He put his hands on his hips and stuck out his chin in a pose that I'd seen a hundred times. However, it had always been directed at a football player who had just missed a block or lost a fumble but almost never a dropped pass. Ohio State didn't pass much when Woody was coaching. I had also seen that particular posture directed at a referee who had made a call that Coach Hayes had seen differently. In this instance the coach looked at the residents and students. He then turned back to me and said, "Doctor, I'm the only man who never made a mistake."

We became good friends.

Coach Hayes knew that I had served in Vietnam with responsibility for Marine casualties, and he and General Lou Walt were friends. They had become acquainted during Coach Hayes' visits to the troops in Vietnam. When General Walt came to Columbus on occasion to visit Woody, I was invited to lunch meetings at the Faculty Club with the coach and the general.

The "sponge" topic never came up again.

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