

# Moments in surgery

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Many of our readers are the guardians of lore, amusing or illuminating, about our surgical heritage. This oral history will be lost unless it is captured now. The Editors invite you to submit anecdotes, vignettes, stories of your mentors (great and small), or simply the tall tales you tell your residents about the way it once was.

## An athlete anonymous

Denton A. Cooley, MD, *Houston, Tex*

MOST SURGEONS OF EARLIER DECADES knew of the remarkable medical achievements of Dr Alfred Blalock, Professor of Surgery at The Johns Hopkins University Medical School. His contributions to surgical science have been important and lasting. Only a fortunate few of his trainees, however, were aware of his interest in sports of all types.

On a Friday in April 1943, shortly after I had transferred to Johns Hopkins Medical School from the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, sunshine unexpectedly broke through Baltimore's overcast skies for the first time in the 2 months since I had arrived. I suggested to a classmate, Lester Persky (who was also a transfer student), that we cut Dr Blalock's noon clinic to play tennis on the court in the central yard at Johns Hopkins.

During our game Dr Blalock crossed the yard with an entourage of residents and interns. He was on his way to talk with Dr Helen Taussig, who was working with him to develop a procedure, later to be known as the Blalock-Taussig operation, to palliate tetralogy of Fallot. Dr Blalock returned to the side of the court and watched us for a couple of games. He beckoned to me, and I reluctantly walked over to talk with him. I fully expected a reprimand for being absent from the scheduled clinic.

To my relief, he instead complimented my performance as a tennis player and then asked if I were equally proficient at Ping-Pong table tennis. When I cautiously gave an affirmative reply, he invited me to join him and his family for a week-

end of Ping-Pong at Gibson Island, a local resort. I could not believe my ears. The weekend with the professor was a memorable experience and the unexpected beginning of our long friendship.

During my 7 years at Johns Hopkins as a student and resident in surgery, I became continually more impressed with Dr Blalock's interest in almost all sports. When a group of us organized a basketball team to represent Johns Hopkins in a city league, he followed our record and the weekly game reports with intense interest. Once he even came to a game with other members of the faculty. I was not aware of his plans to attend and was suffering from the painful after effects of the previous night's festivities. Distressed at the possibility of failing before a man I deeply admired, I attempted to ignore my pounding head and side cramps and managed to play very well. After the game Dr Blalock commented that I was in magnificent physical shape. I thought, "He may be one of the world's greatest surgeons, but he doesn't recognize a dying man when he sees one." In truth, however, I delighted in his approval.

My time with Dr Blalock permitted me to appreciate his grand human qualities; this sincerity and affability similarly endeared him to all his students. He will be remembered both for his medical skill and for his warm, congenial personality. Despite the many awards Dr Blalock received as a surgeon and investigator, he remained an unassuming, humble person—a true team player.

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