

# Home Team Hero

Whether working to return an injured player to the field or to improve medical care in his native country, Bertram Zarins, MD '67, is at the top of his game.

**B**ertram Zarins, MD '67, has a unique collection of honors that include three Super Bowl rings, two American Football Conference championship rings, a United States Olympic ring and a Three Star Medal of Honor bestowed by the President of Latvia.

Dr. Zarins, the Augustus Thorndike Clinical Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery at Harvard Medical School, is considered a pioneer in the field of arthroscopic surgery and sports medicine. He has been team physician for the Boston Bruins for 30 years, the New England Patriots for 25 years, and the New England Revolution for 12 years.

"The ability to fix things and get people back to a high level of activity is very satisfying," says Zarins, who credits his Upstate College of Medicine experience working with David Murray, MD, as formative in influencing the direction of his career.

When Zarins began his training, there was no field of "sports medicine." After Upstate, he did an internship and one year of residency at Johns Hopkins, and was then accepted into the Harvard

Combined Orthopedic Residency program. Because that program had a staggered start, he had nine months to fill before it began and got a job at a clinic in Vail, Colorado, predominantly treating ski injuries. After residency, he spent two years in the Navy, again treating people with sports-type injuries.

But it was a three-month traveling fellowship Zarins was awarded that focused his interests. Zarins used his fellowship to travel around the country and learn about knee injuries and the new field of arthroscopy.

When he returned to Boston, he was invited to join the practice of Carter Rowe, MD, a renowned

shoulder surgeon who took care of most of the Boston-area professional athletes. Zarins became a major contributor to the development of arthroscopic surgery and anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) surgery, an area where new concepts and techniques were evolving and changing quickly.

"When I was a resident, we didn't know how to examine a knee for an ACL and didn't recognize the significance of a torn ACL, so the injury wasn't even treated," Zarins says. "An athlete with an ACL injury rarely returned to competition. Today, someone who has a torn ACL routinely has it repaired and comes back to play."

Zarins considers the highlights of his sports medicine career his five Super Bowls trips with the Patriots and serving as head physician for the U.S. Olympic team at the 1984 Winter Olympics in Sarajevo. "Being a part of that was a thrill," he says.

Perhaps in part because of that exposure, Zarins was invited to speak at the Fifth All-Soviet Congress of Orthopaedics and Traumatology conference in Latvia in 1987, sponsored by the Soviet Union.

Born in Latvia, Zarins and his family escaped to Sweden at the end of World War II when he was four years old. Although he grew up in the United States, many relatives remained in Latvia. So in 1987, he returned for the first time and saw where he came from and met those relatives. At the same time, he was appalled at the very low standard of medical care.

Zarins got the idea to organize a medical conference in Latvia, but to invite other doctors like himself from outside Latvia to inspire some international cooperation. He recruited 250 doctors of Latvian heritage and their families and chartered an airplane to fly the group from Helsinki to Riga, Latvia, marking the first time since World War II that a commercial flight from outside the Soviet Union landed in Latvia.



Zarins on the sidelines of a New England Patriots game examining player Steve Neal.

The first Latvian World Congress in Medicine was held in June 1989. The Congress opened with a public procession—6,000 people marched from the old city of Riga to the Monument of Liberty to place flowers and then to the Sports Palace Hall for the opening ceremony. "It became a freedom movement for Latvia similar to the dockworkers in Poland, except in Latvia it was the doctors," Zarins says. "The Congress became a catalyst for resistance to the Soviets. They were able to remove the Soviet Minister of Health from office and a year and a half later, Latvia was free."

Zarins used the income generated from the meeting to establish the Latvian Medical Foundation, which he runs with his brother Christopher Zarins, MD, a professor of surgery at Stanford. They continue to support a medical congress that takes place every four years and work to improve the quality of medical care in Latvia. In 2003, Zarins was given the Three Star Medal of Honor by Latvia's president, the highest civilian honor in Latvia.

Today, Zarins spends three days a week seeing patients at the Massachusetts General Hospital Sports Medicine Center (which he established) and the other two days doing surgery—mostly arthroscopic procedures of the knee and shoulder. Nights and weekends are spent covering games of

the Boston Bruins, New England Patriots, and New England Revolution, although he plans to turn much of the medical care for the Patriots over to his junior partner this year.

"I look back at my education at Upstate and think it was outstanding, truly the basis of the foundation for my success," says Zarins. "I am especially grateful for the solid teaching in anatomy from Professor Armstrong, which is probably the only subject I continue to use daily."

While evolution is a fact of good medicine, it has been especially pertinent to the field of orthopaedics during the tenure of Zarins' career.

"There's not a single operation I'm doing now that I learned as a resident," he says. "When I first started, there was a lot of open surgery. Patients stayed in the hospital a long time. MRI had not been developed so we didn't have as much knowledge about the injuries as we do today."

"Now almost everything is done as an outpatient and is done arthroscopically. We have sophisticated diagnostic tools and can make rapid, accurate diagnoses. We tend to no longer immobilize joints, but use continuous passive motion and can achieve quicker rehabilitation. It's been exciting to be part of this evolution to much better treatment." ■



Bertram Zarins, MD '67, head physician for the United States Olympic team at XIV Olympic Winter Games in Sarajevo, pictured outside the Olympic village.