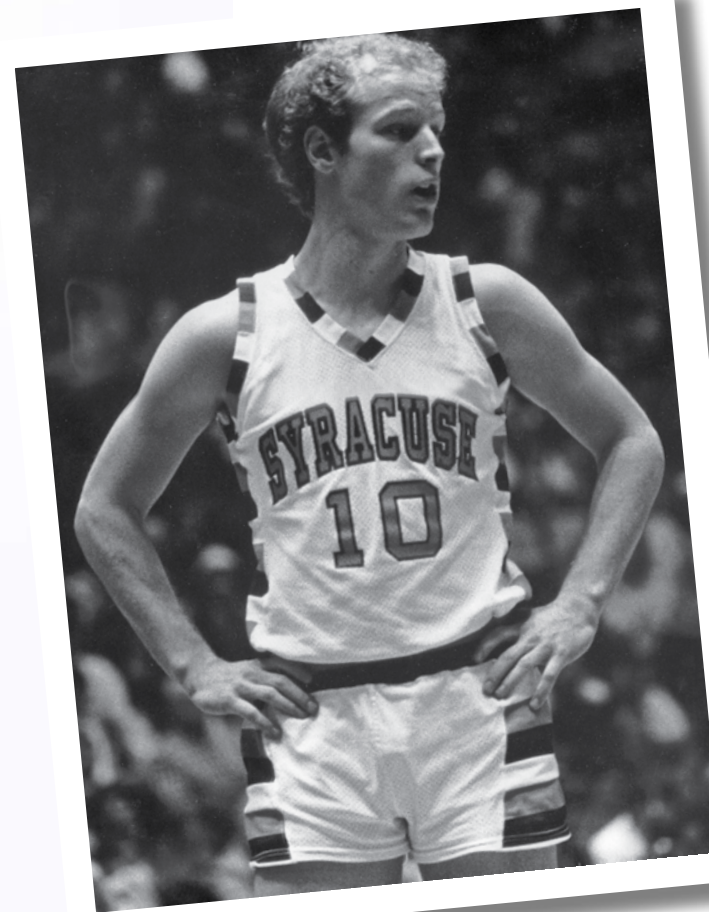




## H I G H S C O R E R BY RENÉE GEARHART LEVY



**Radiologist Hal Cohen, MD '84, mixes his good humor and love for high school athletics into a teaching style that consistently earns top marks from students.**

**“LOOK AROUND THE ROOM,”** the lecturer tells the second-year medical students assembled in the Medical Alumni Auditorium. “What’s asymmetrical?”

The students look around. One pipes up from the back, “This picture over here is crooked.” Sure enough, one of the paintings of Upstate luminaries that ring the room is hanging askew.

“Very good,” says radiologist Hal Cohen, MD '84, who is today’s Practice of Medicine speaker on radiology. “What time does this class end? 1:50. You get to leave at 1:45,” he tells the student.

Projected at the front of the room is not an x-ray image or MRI, but a map of New York State as divided by the New York State High School Athletic Association.

Dr. Cohen has already filled the front row with reluctant participants—students representing the various athletic sections. After reviewing his “10 Rules of Radiology (see sidebar on page 11),” the slides begin and so do the questions.

Today’s topic is neuroradiology. First up, Matt Kasulke from Saranac Lake, otherwise known as Section 7.

Cohen: “What are we looking at?”

“A vertebral spine x-ray,” Kasulke answers correctly.

Cohen: “How do you tell if there are fractures?”

“We see lines,” says Kasulke.

Next is Mike Gumuka, from Ballston Spa, or Section 2.

“Mark, how’s your anatomy?” asks Cohen.

“My anatomy’s good,” quips Gumuka.

Cohen continues to work down the line, butchering each student’s name in the process, asking increasingly more difficult questions. He quizzes Russell Kahmke from Section 9 about Scotty dog appearance in a lumbar vertebrae and Ava Star from New York City on a compression fracture caused by a seat belt. Next up is Misty Ondrusek, from Binghamton, Section 4.



“Do you know David Constantine?” Cohen asks. She does not. “He’s the one person I know in Binghamton,” Cohen says. “Is this view homogeneous or inhomogeneous? You get two chances. She only needs one to get the answer right.”

Josh Nelson, from Section 3, a former football player at Syracuse’s Bishop Ludden High School draws the first slide showing brain anatomy and answers a series of increasingly complex questions.

“He’s on fire! Let’s give him a hand,” cheers Cohen. The 50-minute class has flown by, with no one leaving early.

Cohen himself is a product of Section 10. He grew up in Canton, New York, where his father was a college

basketball coach and he became a star high school player. (Cohen was the New York state high scorer during his junior and senior years and once shot 598 consecutive free throws in 90 minutes during practice.) He attended Syracuse University on a basketball scholarship, joining the team in Jim Boeheim’s inaugural year as coach.

But coming from a team where he’d been the tallest player to one where he was the smallest soon changed his outlook on his professional-career prospects. “After my first semester, when my GPA was higher than my points-per-game average, I had a feeling that maybe the NBA wasn’t in the cards.”

Cohen enjoyed the attention he received from being a top student and became intrigued by medicine from his association with the various health professionals that cared for the team—orthopedist Bruce Baker, MD ’65, internist Jack Dadey, MD, cardiologist Murray Grossman, MD ’45, anesthesiologist Tony Ascioti, MD ’71, ophthalmologist Ken Spitzer, MD, and oral surgeon Paul Fallon, DDS—as well as the team trainer, Don Lowe.

“I started thinking that maybe sports medicine and taking care of athletes might be something I might like to do,” he recalls.

At Upstate, Cohen settled on radiology after a six-week summer elective with Lee Ambrose, MD ’69, in Cortland, choosing to focus on musculoskeletal radiology with an emphasis on sports injuries.

After completing his residency, Cohen spent a year in private practice, but discovered the high-volume pace not to his liking. He returned to Upstate, where he’s been ever since.

“As a medical student and resident, I liked sitting along side the radiologist who had time to go over the anatomy, go through the physiology, really explain things as we sat at the view box together reading films,” he says. “As a physician, I enjoy that combination of reading films and teaching, with less pressure to read as many films as you can in a day.”

His lecture style—which consistently receives outstanding student evaluations—began out of his own medical school experience and personal interests.

“I never wanted to be called on randomly by a professor,” he says. “Especially if I didn’t know the answer.”

By creating his “starting line-up,” Cohen says the students know they’re going to be called on, and he tries to do so in a manner that instills self-confidence, starting with easier questions leading to more difficult and helping a student out if he sees they are having trouble.

“I wanted to get students involved without making them feel uncomfortable or making them not want to come

to lecture,” he says. “You can’t learn 100 things from one lecture, but if you can take away two or three important key things then I know I’ve done my job.”

Throwing an element of sports competition into it is just a reflection of who he is—a former high school and college athlete married to a former high school and college athlete (his wife played basketball for SUNY-ESF) with four daughters who are high school or college athletes (“They didn’t really have a choice,” he says.)

His use of humor comes naturally. Once, he called on a student he knew by name, only to discover—when the class erupted into laughter—that he’d gotten the name totally wrong. Ever since, he’s been calling students by the wrong names on purpose to the same effect.

He also lightens the mood by occasionally throwing out an oddball question at the moment a student is expecting to be grilled. “Do you know Brian Wicks?” he asks a student from Seattle.

“He’s a tall guy. He was my roommate in medical school. Say hi if you meet him.”

**TWO DAYS LATER, THIS SAME GROUP OF** students meets again for part two of their radiology lecture, this time covering musculoskeletal radiology. Today they’re in the 9th floor auditorium.

“Okay, look around the room,” Cohen directs. “Do you see anything asymmetrical?”

No response.

“Does anything seem different about me?” he asks.

“You’ve lost weight!” calls out a student from the back of the room.

“How perceptive. Come on down,” invites Cohen.

Today, he fills the first row quickly, as students are less reluctant to participate since they know they are not going to be questioned in a punitive fashion.

“Josh,” who’d identified Cohen’s “weight loss,” is also able to identify all the bones in the hand.

Josh—then Joe—actually Paul Corsello from Rochester (Section 5), points out the location of the fractures.

Arpit (sounds like Are-pete) Amin from Windsor, Ontario (“Seriously?” asks Cohen, calling him “Repeat” for the rest of the lecture), helps diagnose a fracture to the scaphoid bone.

“What’s the rule?” asks Cohen. “Always get two views.” Sure enough, the view on the second x-ray makes the fracture more visible.

Next is Jewel Appleton from the Bronx, then Erick Rizzotto from Hingham, Massachusetts, then Heather

### Cohen’s Rules of Radiology

Top 10 Tips to a Successful Diagnosis

1. Coffee
2. Old films
3. Make sure you have the correct patient
4. Two views (90 degrees from each other)
5. Symmetry
6. Let the soft tissue lead you to the injury (swelling)
7. Look at the whole film
8. Use the book of Normal Variants
9. A dark room
10. Use a bright light to view soft tissues

Foreman, from Fairport, New York, (Section 5, but chosen because she’s a Syracuse University graduate).

“Nancy,” he calls her.

“Yes,” she responds, not missing a beat, becoming Nancy for the remainder of class. In the middle of being questioned about an arm fracture, she stops Cohen to ask if *she* can ask *him* a question.

“Sure,” he says, expecting a follow up on the slide. “Only if it’s easy.”

“Do you know Dr. Tom Fondy?” she asks.

The class, and Cohen, laugh. He may have met his match with this one. “I do not,” he says.

“Do you know Jim Boeheim?”

A grin spreads across Cohen’s face. “I think we have time for a quick story . . .”

