

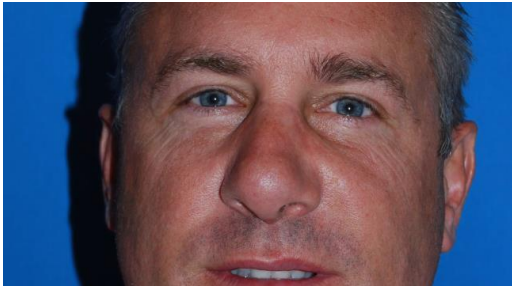
SunSentinel

Florida Panthers surgeon: tummy tucks by day, puck injuries at night



DR. GREGORY ALBERT
Panthers Plastic Surgeon

"A minute to them seems like 10 minutes," Albert said of players who tell him to hurry up so they can go back and play.



SHAWN THORNTON
Panthers Left Wing

He's the kind of guy many South Floridians seek out — and one hockey players want to avoid.

Gregory Albert: a plastic surgeon by day taking care of tummy tucks, breast implants and face-lifts; by night, one of the doctors on the **Florida Panthers** medical team.

Forty-one nights a season, Albert rushes over from his office in Delray Beach to the BB&T Center in Sunrise, where the Panthers play. He's there for every home game and usually takes seat No. 13 on the fourth row to the left of the Panthers' bench. He watches all of the action up close and is ready to switch to doctor mode should pucks start flying, sticks go swinging or brawls erupt.

At almost every game, Albert's bound to do some suturing, stop bleedings and evaluate injuries.

"It is tough to watch sometimes when a guy gets a puck to the face or a stick to the face," the 47-year-old doctor said. "But you get used to it after a while."

Albert was recruited for the job more than 11 years ago by another team doctor. He was pretty honest about his qualifications during that interview process. "I said, 'I don't know much about hockey, but I know how to fix faces and noses.'"

He's caught the hang of it, though.

"I became a fan," Albert said over loud cheers at the BB&T Center on Dec. 29, the night the Panthers beat the **Montreal Canadiens** 3 to 1, clinching their seventh straight win of the season — on their way to 11 straight on Thursday. "I quickly learned the sport. It's amazing the subtleties you notice when you watch it for 40 games a year."

Panthers defenseman Brian Campbell thinks it's cool to have Albert around, but he'd rather not cross paths with him, professionally speaking. Nothing personal.

"He's nice to say hi to, but I don't want to be one of his patients," said Campbell, who's actually been treated by Albert a couple times for cuts to the face.

"Your hope is you don't ever need them, to be fully honest," **Shawn Thornton**, a Panthers left wing player, said of the team's medical staff. "But you always have that peace of mind that they're around in case something happens. It's one less thing you have to think about getting ready for a game."

When players get slammed with pucks, sticks or fists, they're rushed over to an office near the players' locker room that's outfitted with an examination table, a dentist's chair, medical supplies and a looming game clock.

"A minute to them seems like 10 minutes," Albert said of players who tell him to hurry up so they can go back and play.

The team's medical staff includes orthopedic surgeons, a dentist, cardiologist, vision specialist, neurologist and chiropractor. The doctors also treat injured referees and players from opposite teams.

"Sometimes it's three-deep, sometimes it's [dentist's] chair, surgical table, X-rays, it could be from both teams at the same time. It's interesting," said Martin Robins, the Panthers' dentist since the team formed in 1993. "It's like a triage in here."

And it turns out, even tough hockey players can be afraid of needles.

One time, a player from an opposing team was hurried over to the Panthers' medical office for a hit to the face. He needed stitches and the doctors planned to first numb the area with anesthesia, but he kept declining it because he didn't want to be pinched with a needle. Eventually, his trainer convinced him it was best for him.

"OK, but you have to hold my hand," Albert recalls the player telling his trainer.

Albert takes care of broken noses, lacerations and other injuries, but he usually doesn't have to play the bad guy and prevent players from returning to

the game, he said. About one-third of the players get sutures two to three times a season, the rest, about once in a season. When injuries are a bit more serious, he refers players to his Delray office, where he's been practicing since 1999 after his plastic surgery residency at St. Louis University in Missouri. Sometimes players have procedures after the season is over, so they have time to recuperate without missing games.

Players nowadays are more accepting of plastic surgery compared with players of decades past, Albert said. "You don't see a lot of players with big scars that haven't been fixed, you won't see them without teeth," he said. "The guys want to look good."

But his main goal isn't to make them look camera ready, he says.

"You see a lot of my players, I've treated their noses but, they're not better looking," Albert said. "But they function better. The importance with athletes is to get their noses to function better first. Secondly, we'll talk about the appearance."

ROGERS & COWAN

ENTERTAINMENT & LIFESTYLE

LOS ANGELES | FLORIDA | NEW YORK | LONDON | NASHVILLE

<http://www.sun-sentinel.com/sports/florida-panthers/fl-panthers-surgeon-20160108-story.html>