

Orthopedic Rehab Specialists Making Therapy Painfully Fun



(Rebecca O'Malley photos)

Therapists Gordon Green (pictured left) and David Black (pictured right) ease patients fears by encouraging a fun, relaxed environment.

By Chris Linden, web editor/editorial assistant

If you didn't know better, you might not realize David Black, PT, MS, OCS, is one of the men in charge at Orthopedic Rehab Specialists (ORS), 2662 McFarland Road, Rockford. Dressed in the same polo shirt and khaki pants as the other therapists, Black spends much of his day treating his patients and poking fun of co-workers.

As business owners, Black and co-owner Gordon Green, PT, OMT, put a lot of trust in their staff, and that's helped to establish a relaxed, yet professional, environment inside the rehabilitation service's five offices, located in Rockford, Byron, Dixon, Roscoe and Belvidere. Most of the daily business minutiae is performed by a dedicated support staff, directed by billing manager Jodie Larson and business manager Peggy Kruger.

"When we opened up our Dixon office, we leased property, did extensive remodeling and had an open house, and David hadn't even seen the property until we held the open house," Kruger says. "The guys just let me get to work."

Today, a staff of 38 has rewarded Black's and Green's trust with loyalty. Some of the company's first hires, from nearly 10 years ago, are still here. Employee turnover is minimal.

These therapists specialize in a wide range of treatments, and many grew up in the communities they serve. Patients find

services for orthopedic conditions; sports injury recovery; pre-employment fitness screenings; and hand, occupational, cancer-related, or surgical rehabilitation.

But ORS hardly feels like a medical office. With many windows and exposed building elements, the Rockford headquarters has a cheerful, sporty ambiance.

The therapy gym is filled with workout benches and weight machines, and sports memorabilia covers the walls. There's a row of jerseys from the likes of Peyton Manning and Dan Marino. Patients can sit in stadium seats purchased from the old Busch Memorial Stadium, in St. Louis, and from Wrigley Field, in Chicago.

The Rockford headquarters was designed by Green's brother, whose Kansas City-based architectural firm specializes in sports venues. The relaxed environment is part of the owners' strategy to loosen up nervous patients. Therapists keep the mood light, making jokes and talking sports – anything to put a patient at ease. Therapy isn't always fun, but Black and crew sure try.

"We enjoy working with each other, and I think that translates to the patients enjoying their recovery and even having fun," Black says. "It's serious when it needs to be serious, but it's not serious when it doesn't need to be. We'll talk sports with them,



(Rebecca O'Malley photos)

With workout equipment and sports memorabilia all around, the gym inside Orthopedic Rehab Specialists feels more like a fitness center than a therapist's office.

or discuss what was on TV last night, and it's a nice relationship you develop. You end up becoming friends with a lot of your patients."

It shows. Photos and newspaper pages, autographed by former patients, fill the walls on the way to the gym. And, Kruger says, it's not uncommon for patients to drop by, just to say hello.

"It's not at all an institutional feel, but we can meet that need, if truly desired," Kruger says. "Patients come in here, and if they've had a different physical therapy experience before, may begin with a deer-in-the-headlights look. By the time they leave, they're out there in the gym playfully bantering openly with our ORS staff, fellow patients and of course with the therapists."

Back in 1999, eager to start their own enterprise, Black and Green left jobs at Rockford Clinic to open ORS. The clients flooded in, so much so that the partners hired three people before ORS' first birthday. In 2002, they opened their first satellite clinic, Belvidere Rehab & Sports Medicine, 1255 Logan Ave. Additional clinics followed, with the newest location, in Roscoe, Ill., opening this past January.

"I'd be very surprised if there's another clinic in town that has a staff with as many years of experience as we have, among the entire staff," Black says. "A lot of us have specialties beyond the normal physical therapy degree, which is unusual. If you combine that with our years of experience, that's where you get the valuable clinical experience we have."

Black is one of the city's only certified orthopedic specialists; Mark Skaggs is certified in strength and conditioning. Rex Brown and Rachel Viel, ORS' early hires, are trained in work-related injuries and pre-employment screenings.

A few years ago, Black and Green added another specialty to their roster, when certified hand therapists Karen Weber and Leah Crull joined ORS. Now as the Certified Hand Center, Weber and Crull help patients with shoulder, elbow, wrist and hand injuries. Specialties like hand therapy, oncology rehabilitation and occupational services help ORS to stand out.

"Many of our therapists are capable of seeing a hand patient," Kruger says. "But if your livelihood depends on your hands, who do you want to be treated by? Wouldn't you want to be treated by a licensed certified hand specialist?"

It also helps when old dogs eagerly learn new tricks. Black's desk is covered with stacks of medical journals, and on a slow day, he's likely to read a few, scouring the pages for new ideas. His staff members, too, seek out new research and visit seminars around the country. Creativity and education are high priorities.

"With tight budgets these days, staff education tends to be one of the first things to get cut out of various clinics," Black says. "So far, we haven't had to, and I don't anticipate it. That'll be one of the last things to go if we do have to cut our budget."

Black prides himself on education and promoting the profession. Both he and therapist Mike "Woody" Wood routinely make guest lectures at the University of Minnesota. But Black has also learned about the challenges of running a business.

"It's a lot more involved than I ever thought," Black says. "The whole day-to-day operation and the time that's involved in setting it up, and running it, is astronomical, compared to what I thought it would be. I thought it would be a lot simpler than it is."

When they hired Kruger in 2005, Black and Green stepped back from some business operations and started seeing more patients. Today, they each have full patient schedules. They've found it pays to keep other services in-house, too. After outsourcing its billing department for years, ORS hired its own billing staff, to more carefully negotiate with insurance companies and overdue payments.

"It just helps us to meet the needs of our patients better than having a rigid structure where someone else is telling us the way they're doing things," Black says. "That was a concern because they did not have the same connection with our patients. I understand you can't give away your services for free. However, you can offer flexibility with repayment and make it a little bit better for everyone."

Inside the gym, a woman is exercising her shoulder, pulling a cord attached to some weights, as she twists her shoulder back and forth. She moves to another weight-lifting machine, where she stretches her leg. Another woman is getting a check-up on her knee, while two younger patients wait in evaluation rooms.

ORS serves a wide range of clientele, from young athletes to older joint-replacement patients, and everything in between. Black loves helping patients to get back to normal.

"I love working with people," he says. "They come in here either stiff or sore, or sometimes both. When you can get them better and improve their lifestyle, and make a friend in the process – that's rewarding. I've got a great group of people I work with, and we have a lot of fun with the staff here. If I'm going to have to work, I wouldn't do it anywhere else." ■